

MIDNIGHT MAYHEM BOOK IV

In Chaos We Reign

People whispered his name in fear.

*I screamed to wake
he was between my thighs.*



USA Today & Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

AMO JONES

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We
Reign

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I was the trick that they could never play.
She was the greatest game of all...

There is elegance that comes from being carved from the ashes of all the darkness that surrounds you in the world. You start as dust, and you end as dust. At least that's what I always thought. Crowned Princess Mayhem all my life became old fast, and I found myself forging my iron crown with the blood of our enemies.

To The Brothers of Kiznitch, I was nothing but a little brat that always got my way. I was the sister none of them asked for, but they'd find themselves needing. He was no different. Loving Keaton Cicero was never going to be easy. There was evil within him that would never be accepted.

They thought their over-protectiveness had kept me safe all these years, but they were wrong. Everything they thought they knew... was about to burn around them. I wasn't someone who needed protecting...

They were.

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To my readers. Because without you, my characters would only have me to
bully.



One

Cartier

Sixteen years old

I remember the first time I realized my brother was crazy. I was twelve years old, and I watched him rip the meat off a man's bones after he kidnapped me and locked me in an abandoned house to play dress-up. The man was a stranger, and even though our family business was risky, it had no connection with Midnight Mayhem or Kiznitch. Yet my glorious brother tore him to pieces with his bare hands and didn't blink once. Tonight is just like then, only worse. Worse because this is someone I know, and it's someone who tried to hurt me.

Doors slam closed outside, and I stop pouring the cashmere pink bubbles into my bath. Reaching for my phone on the counter, I open Spotify and hit play on "OT" by Niykee Heaton before dipping my toe into the warm water. Bubbles spill onto the dark veined marble floors as I sink deeper beneath the water, closing my eyes in an attempt at scrubbing the night away. I don't want Kyrin to hear me cry because I know it will only make him worse. I've handled this school since my parents dumped me in it when Kyrin threw a fit to keep me away from Mayhem, and I will continue to handle it when he goes back on the road. Right now, I need peace. I need

to feel nothing. See nothing. Hear nothing. They say drowning is the most peaceful death, I can imagine why. After being suffocated from oxygen for minutes, you welcome the feeling of numbness. Like now. Void. Stuck between a realm of life and death, I could float and hold my breath until I simply... die.

A hand is around my throat, pulling me out of my haze and I swipe water from my face angrily when I resurface. “What the fuck!” As soon as my eyes open, they land on Keaton, one of the four Brothers of Kiznitch. He and my brother have been inseparable since they were born—they all are—but Keaton isn’t like the rest of them. He is simply... different.

My mouth closes as I take in his clothes. Blotches of blood litter his designer jeans, and when I finally look up at his face, I find mud and more blood all over his cheek and shirt. The Brothers of Kiznitch have all been my extended brothers, all of them except Keaton. He is nothing like a brother to me, and that’s largely because he has never treated me the same way the other Brothers have. He doesn’t seem pissed about my presence, but not that fond of it either. He has always just existed. For a long time anyway. But I don’t know if I’d call what we share a normal friendship. My stomach always twists anytime I catch him staring, and it’s become more frequent the older I get, but that doesn’t change the fact that we both fight. Fight probably more than any of the other brothers, Kyrin not included.

“What the fuck, Keaton?” I glare up at him while leaning back against the curve of the bath, flicking my toe against the faucet to turn the hot water back on.

I see him dip to a kneeling position out of the corner of my eye, when his fingers curl around my chin, forcing my face to his. I hold my breath when his eyes settle on mine. Keaton is the scariest of all The Brothers—to everyone but me. Darkness hovers over him everywhere he goes, and no matter what he does, he’ll never be rid of it. Torment swims beneath the surface of his god-like features, and it has always bothered me that I can never take it away. No one can.

“Was there anyone else involved?” His voice is low enough to be a warning. I find myself losing my train of thought when I trace the edges of his naturally swollen lips.

“No,” I whisper, only it comes out broken from the saliva forming in my throat.

He stands back to his full height and kicks off his boots, tugging his shirt over his head from the back and throwing it onto a pile in the corner.

“Keaton...” I warn. “If Kyrin—”

“—don’t really give a fuck right now, Tigger.” I close my eyes and lean against the edge of the bath, listening as the clink of his belt falls to the floor before a long stretch of silence drifts between us. Just when I think he’s not going to do what he’s going to do, I feel his leg brush mine as he lowers himself into the bath opposite me. Keaton and I have kept each other at a distance, and most of the time I think I’m imagining the things I do. The long stares, brushes of hands, lingering touches. We fight as hard as we clearly care about one another, but it has always been clear. The lines have never been blurred.

Until now.

I should have at least left the lights on, and maybe not lit so many candles. I don’t realize I’m holding my breath until I have to exhale slowly, shakily and *desperately*.

“Open your eyes.”

I slowly peel them open, and my teeth sink into my lower lip when I catch him staring at me. His hair’s damp and sticking up messily as if he just ran a wet hand through it, and his cheeks are pinched red from the hot water. Keaton is large, bigger than the other Brothers, so his whole torso is out of the bubbles, his long arms stretched wide across the edges. I fixate on one of the demons that is tatted over the front of his throat. He called it my pet when I was twelve years old. He tried to use it to scare me into thinking if I ever got a boyfriend, it would come out and kill him. Never thought much about that until right now.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” he asks, and his tone is so low it’s a notch above a whisper. If it wasn’t for the tightness in his jaw, I would say he’s calm. But he isn’t. I don’t want to talk about it any more than I want to think about it. A jock locking me in a bedroom with his weird girlfriend and drugging me? No thanks. Hard pass.

“Was it messy?” I dip my fingers into the bubbles, forming a peak with my middle finger.

“You know we don’t share that shit with you.” His fingers come to mine and I pause, looking up at him behind damp lashes. My heart stammers in my chest, sending a live wire right between my thighs when his dark eyes settle on me. “Come here.”

“Keaton...”

He rolls his eyes, brushing bubbles into my face and leaning back against the tub. He brings his eyes back to mine, his lip twitching. “You wanna make me repeat myself?” Keaton and I have never flirted openly. Nothing as obvious as he’s being right now. What happened tonight was shitty, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy him here with me because he makes me feel safe. Keaton has always been the silent protector of the group, but his bullets are invisible. You never know you’ve been shot by him until it’s too late and you’re bleeding out onto the pavement watching your life flash before your eyes.

We’re in a bath. I don’t know if he’s naked, but I know I am. Not that nudity means anything to a Kiznitch, we’ve all seen each other naked, so that’s not what’s weird. What’s weird is that this whole exchange actually isn’t weird at all...

I slide forward, resting my hands on his tatted knees, as he widens them and leans farther back, his head resting against the back of the tub. He hooks his arm around my back, pulling me in against his chest. Water splashes onto the floor and I sigh as I rest against his solid chest. All the torment from tonight runs out of my system at the closeness of him, as if it knows it has nothing on who is beneath me. I’m not surprised that he has his briefs on still, of course, the sexual tension is all in my head. All one-sided. He’s merely comforting little Ice Princess of Mayhem, all while I’m drooling over my brother’s best friend.

His body shifts beneath me, and I feel his lips brush against my head. I trace the pattern of a skull and motorbike on his inner bicep. “I’m sorry you had to kill someone for me tonight.”

His body stiffens before he shuffles to the side. “Look at me.” His voice is low enough to comfort me, but hard enough to demand I follow instructions.

Tilting my head to the side, I peer up at him from below, my eyelids feeling weighted. Probably from the magnesium salts I poured in earlier. Dammit. Why did I do that?

His thick lashes fan over his high cheekbones when he blinks, but he never breaks our connection. “There isn’t a person I wouldn’t kill for you.” He pulls away, leaving me to decipher his words. “If anything, it helps...” he finishes, running his palm over his face. “But you already know that.”

It's not until the corner of his mouth curves upward that I realize I've been staring at his lips. Soft but with enough swell to accentuate the curves of the delicate bow that dips in the middle. His lips are perfect. Too pretty to be on a man with demon tattoos.

"What are you thinking about? Hmm?" It's almost a slur and has a direct line to reboot every wet dream I've had of him since I knew I could have one.

My eyes slam into his, but my tongue sneaks out and slips over my bottom lip. "Not sure I'm really thinking at all..."

His arm that's around my back tightens while his eyes fall to my lips with that same smirk on his. "Go on..." He leans in close enough for the tips of our noses to touch. "Do it."

Without thinking, I bring my hand to the back of his neck and pull myself onto his lap so I'm straddling him. His other hand drops to my hip—not my ass, my hip—when he leans back against the tub again, that stupid smile still on his mouth. He hasn't stopped me, and by the cues I'm getting, he's not gonna. The bulge of his Adam's apple pulses when he swallows, and before I can back out and put myself back in the corner of the prized princess, I rest my forehead on his and he pauses for a moment, his eyes crossing in on mine. When my lips lower to his, and he realizes I'm not bitching out, the hand he had on my hip finally slips to my ass as his lips part. My heart flatlines when I realize he's allowing me to kiss him. His lips taste as soft as they look, and I deepen the kiss, grabbing a chunk of his hair with that same hand that's on his neck and tugging slightly as I flick my tongue over the curve of his lip. *Jesus*. His tongue. He slides it inside my mouth as his other hand lands on my other ass cheek, pulling me against the thick swell between his legs.

His fingers sink into the fat of my ass cheeks as he deepens the kiss, slowing the pace enough to make me dig my fingernails into his shoulder blades as I rock against him. My clit pulses at the friction and my thighs tighten around his waist, but nothing—and I mean nothing—can match the way my heart races from having him like this. In this position. Between my thighs. I could come apart right here and now and he wouldn't even know.

His hand travels up my spine before my hair is wrapped around his fist and he's tugging me away from his lips.

I press the base of my thumb against his swollen bottom lip. Pinched red like his cheeks. "Don't..." I know he's going to stop me, and after all

that, I might just burst into tears if he denies me of it.

“Baby.” My stomach does cartwheels as I swallow down how it feels to be called that from him, even though I know his next words are going to be anticlimactic. “I can’t do this with you. You and I both know that...”

I reach for his cheek, running my finger over the harsh edges of his angular jaw. “Please.” Apparently, I’ve lowered myself to begging.

He kisses me softly down the side of my neck until he reaches my ear. “Not yet.”

All the heat that poured through me from our kissing and touching starts to turn to molten lava. “Fine,” I whisper over his lips. “Then you’ll have to see me fuck someone else. *Everyone else*. Until you can get over the fact that my brother doesn’t have a say in who I open these legs for.”

He doesn’t react. This is not surprising because Keaton has always been void of pointless emotion when it comes to petty drama. You’ll never catch him in it. But to say he’s emotionless isn’t right either, because he has a lot—which is why he has so much to release when he finally does. *Bless*.

A dark chuckle tickles the curve of my neck. “First of all, this ain’t got shit to do with your brother. I’ll fuck you every single fucking time he’s not watching. You think I’m scared of him? You forget I taught him everything he knows...” His teeth catch my earlobe. “And you wanna try me? Then game on, Tigger. Let’s see how many more tattoos you give me.”

The first time I rode a bike, I was running from Kyrin. My parents were almost never home because they were always on the road, but when they were, my mom made an effort to bake. She’d make donuts that would dissolve on the base of your tongue, leaving an after-taste of buttery cinnamon sugar that would leave you craving for more, long after the last one had been eaten. Kyrin was angry that I had eaten the final donut. That’s how petty my brother was. I swung my leg over his bike that was a model or two too big for me, and I kick-started it to life. I didn’t have time to think because I squeezed the handle and it shot forward. Lucky the Nero manor at The Village backed up to a forest clearing because I didn’t know how to slow, brake, or stop. Kyrin was yelling at me from behind—probably about the donuts—and the wind was whisking through my hair at speeds I didn’t dare look down to see, and it was all frightening at first. It wasn’t until I figured out the clutch, the gear change, and—thankfully—the brake, that I recognized the power between my legs. I continued through the forest and

didn't look back. Trees zipped past me, and I directed the front wheel onto a dirt path, the same one that Kyrin rode on, and I ran on. It took you to all the other manors in The Village if you stuck to the path, but I'd never gone to the middle. I'd never strayed off this path when I wandered.

I squeezed the handle and the bike zipped forward. The faster I went, the wider my smile. I looked down at the speedometer in time to see the stick tilt to the side as I picked up speed. I needed one. No, I needed one now. I couldn't believe The Brothers all got a bike and no one ever asked me if I wanted one. What kind of staunch masculinity was that shit?

I hit the brakes when I came to a crossroad, leaning the bike to the side and closing my eyes as the engine twanged between my thighs.

My eyes popped open, and I jumped on, launching forward onto the clearing that had no path. The trees were far spread, and I didn't know if it was nature or The Fathers had hired someone, but there were never really any fallen trees out here.

I slowed down a little since I was on a path of uncertainty, but I continued at a speed fast enough to think I knew where I was going. The wind continued to assault my hair, and the smile never left my face. I dodged rocks and branches from the rogue path of the forest, when I saw that the path ended a few meters ahead. I tapped the brake and skidded to a halt with dirt and twigs flinging into the air just as I hit the edge.

"Holy shit..." I peered down over the edge, my feet tingling with adrenaline. Down the bottom of what looked like a hundred-foot drop was a large lake of water, but what backed up to that was what stopped me. There was a large building with ceilings that could rival the Midnight Mayhem tent. Four large spikes arched to the sky, but instead of whatever the tent was made of, it had walls. Glass walls that were tinted black. If it wasn't for the metal Kiznitch star that was stapled above the opening, I would have thought a rival group had been living below us all this time.

The bike continued to idle between my thighs, and when I revved the engine and started to back away, movement from below stopped me. Keaton glared up at me. He was shirtless, wearing nothing but jeans.

I tilted my head.

He shook his and waved his arm at me to leave.

What was this place and why had it been hidden?

Literally.



Two

Keaton

One week later

Cartier Nero was notorious for landing her ass in hot water. Constantly. And this is a real fucking problem when she has access to four weapons at her disposal who all would die and kill for her. The killing part is important... because we do it. Often. For her. And by we, I mean usually Ky and me.

The little bitch flutters her lashes and gets whatever the fuck she wants because she's Cartier Nero.

Midnight Mayhem's princess.

The fucking Ice Queen of Kiznitch.

No shit. She earned that name, not from her teal hair—the color of water when it freezes over the ocean bed—but because that's exactly what she is. A cold ass *bitch*. Her parents' first mistake was putting her into a normal ass school and not allowing her on the road with us, because now—I was pretty sure I'd burn this house down with all these stupid fucking pupes still inside.

"Cartier!" I yell, and her little body pauses just before the glass doors open out to the backyard. She doesn't move. The music is still playing

around us, and sweaty teens continue to dance to the beat of the song, but she heard me. Loud and fucking clear.

Just when I think she's going to turn around to face me, she bolts forward and ducks between the bodies on the patio that spill out into the LED illuminated pool.

My upper lip curls as I snatch someone's beer from them, following her footsteps. She fucking knows what she's doing. Brat.

As soon as I hit the patio, my phone starts vibrating in my pocket and I swipe it unlocked when I see it's Kyrin.

"She there?"

I don't bother telling him that I've already lost her in the crowd. "Yeah. How's the girl?" Cartier is good at playing diva, but the second she drops blood, it becomes a Kiznitch cover-up. We were about to leave NYC for a year because of our international schedule and she had to throw her toys out of the cot one last time. On her birthday, nonetheless.

"Alive." Kyrin shuffles around in the background and my eyes fly around the space. Flashy lights, laughing girls, horny boys—horny boys staring at Cartier. "Maybe I should just put a bullet between her eyes. She could be messy and make this a problem."

The Nero city house in the Upper East Side of New York is about as basic as they wanted it to be. High ceilings, new appliances, and all five bedrooms upstairs. I don't know when the last time the older Neros were here, but by the state of it, I'd say around the same time we left, which means Cartier, who is *now* all but seventeen, has been running around playing queen of NYC and with an unlimited amount of money. I can only imagine the shit she has gotten into.

My eyes land on her instantly where she's seated on a chair beside the pool with three other guys and another girl. There's a table between them with coke dusted in straight lines. Her hair is out and in soft waves, and her face is layered with makeup. I get distracted when she flicks the rolled dollar bill around her fingers before leaning down and sniffing not one, but three lines in one hit.

Clearly, she's giving a new meaning to her nickname the Ice Queen.

"No," I answer my trigger-happy friend, heading right to where she is. "I'll be there soon." Hanging up with him, I shove my phone back into my pocket and kneel beside Cartier, my hand resting on her knee.

“Yo, man, you’re dreaming if you think she’ll let you hit. She only fucks teachers.”

I freeze, my grip around her thigh tensing. Her eyes are glued on the table, unwilling to look at me.

“What?” I mutter through gritted teeth but don’t move from her. I need to see her reaction when he repeats himself. How her sharp features melt when he fucking declares that she has been fucking her teacher.

A hand comes to my shoulder and I spin around, my fist flying straight into his nose. Blood spits out over my knuckles as I stand to my height. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

I turn back to Cartier, who hasn’t moved from her spot. “Look at me.” She doesn’t, and when I wrap my bloody fingers around her chin, forcing her face up to mine, I see it there. The fire, the ice, and everything that makes her a Nero, but it’s her eyes that are always my undoing. Something I’ve kept to myself since we were kids, because if anyone ever found out, Kyrin and I would send each other straight to Valhalla, and right now, she’s not worth losing a brother over.

Maybe one day.

Just not today.

“I didn’t know you were back.” Her blue eyes are lined with dark mascara or whatever shit chicks use to make it look all pirate-like. When the glass in her eyes forms a teardrop that falls down her cheek, I tighten my grip around her chin.

“I’m shutting this shit down, and we need to talk.”

She finally shoves out of my grip, swiping the tears from her cheek and pushing up from her chair. She slides her phone out from between her tits and hits pause on Spotify before pushing her fingers between her lips. “Everyone out!” They move quickly as if they’ve tested Cartier before and have witnessed firsthand the wrath of her anger. She’s not always that way, and only around people she truly doesn’t respect or like. Which makes her both painfully annoying and dangerous. I’m guessing the drama from a week ago with the fuckwit jock and his girlfriend died out the way we wanted it to. With Cartier not involved and her reputation intact.

I watch as people shuffle out, including the guy I punched to the ground who has his friends on either side, helping him up. I chuckle, shaking my head while grabbing Cartier by the wrist and dragging her back toward the house. Red Solo cups litter the floor, and empty pizza boxes lie messily

over the coffee tables. The thousands of dollars' worth of coke is still chilling out on the table. This is a poster for every rich kid with too much money and not enough love.

Grabbing my hoodie from the back of my collar, I pull it over my head and toss it onto her lap. "Put it on and don't fucking fight with me. I'm not in the mood." I fall onto the sofa in the family room, spreading my legs wide and watching her carefully. "Your brother is pissed, by the way. What the fuck happened?"

"Nothing," she snaps, shoving the hoodie over her head to hide the little leather crop top she's wearing that flashes her swollen tits out to the world. Cartier has the body of a woman years above her age. We're Midnight Mayhem, yeah, but there's a reason why Cartier isn't on the road, and it has everything to do with the fact that none of us want her there. For more than one reason.

One being—the front door slams against the wall and she jolts, peeking her head out through the gap—her brother.

"What the fuck was that, Car! You beat that bitch to a fucking pulp!" Kyrin leans down and presses his face close to hers. She winces, falling back onto the sofa opposite me. "That what you're doing now too, hmmm? Being the school bitch isn't enough for you, you gotta throw hands on the poor peasants too?"

Her baby blue eyes roll to the back of her head. "Chill out, the both of you. Fuck. It was all" —she flicks her hands around the place—"consensual."

My finger twitches as I shuffle forward, resting my elbows on my thighs. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." She finally glares at me, and I have to fight with myself not to smirk right at her. Since our cute little make-out session in the bathtub, she's been purposely staying away from me. Good. She should. Her cheeks flush red as she stumbles on her words, staring back up at Ky. "We were in a cage fight. Like, with people throwing bets, and I just so happen to be the best." She shoves Kyrin in the chest and my brows hit my hairline. What the fuck? Cage fighting?

I lean back in my chair and chuckle. "Well, shit."

She continues her rant. "And I don't appreciate you both ruining my *birthday party* and tipping my life upside down!"

Kyrin growls. I mean straight up growls, and I love this part because for whatever reason that God, or whoever created us, decided to make cute little families, they straight up thought to themselves, *hey, let's put these two assholes as siblings*. “You’re done.”

Her eyes widen, and I see the exact moment fear whistles through her ears, because all the color in her face turns to stone. Kyrin has the control where Cartier is concerned, he even trumps their parents. After the last shitshow of a mess we had to clean up, she was already on thin ice. There’s no surprise Ky has snapped. He pushes off her chair, making his way to the alcohol cabinet tucked beside the fireplace. “I don’t give a fuck what you want anymore. You continuously test my patience. You’re—”

“—also fucking her teacher,” I add calmly, keeping my eyes on hers. I want her out of this fucking city and away from everyone, stat. I ignore the teacher thing because I can kill him later. *How many fucking people has she slept with?* And why did I assume she was a virgin? Oh yeah, I know, because she was underage, and I also thought she was smart.

She freezes, her fingers balling into a fist on top of her lap. “He lied. Jarrod has had a crush on me since I started that school.”

“You’re fucking underage...” I answer coolly. I never need to use anger with my words, because she knows when I’m mad. When I’m pissed. When I’m fucking anything. Cartier has been inside my head since the day she was born.

I see the exact moment she chooses roguery. The hues of blue in her eyes seem to shine brighter any time wickedness is about to make its appearance. “Was.” My mouth slams shut.

“Is that true?” Kyrin doesn’t even notice the back and forward between her and me. He also hasn’t moved from his current spot. That’s for her safety more than it’s for his. “You fucking your teacher?” Kyrin snatches the bottle of whiskey and mutters swear words in Romanian as he disappears through the riddled litter, stomping upstairs.

I wait until the door slams closed before I finally break the silence. “Your fucking teacher?”

“What’s the matter, *Alucard*?” She leans back against the chair while flicking her leg over the other. “You said game on.” Her tongue rolls over her bottom lip. “So let’s play.”

My teeth clench so tight I almost hear a faint crack vibrate through my skull. And it isn’t for the use of her stupid fucking nickname for me. “You

think this is fucking cute?” I lean forward and rest my elbows on my thighs. “You know where he’s going to send you?”

She raises an eyebrow. “Correction, I know where he *wants* to send me. I know how to work my brother.” She’s right, she does, but she’s mistaken. There’s no working around him this time. Now, she’ll definitely get sent to some nunnery in the middle of ass crack nowhere. I’ll leave her to figure that out.

She slowly stands, taking long strides toward me. My fingers twitch as I rest back against the old Victorian sofa, smirking up at her while widening my legs.

“I’m not gonna stop this time...” I warn as she lowers herself onto my lap. Cartier wasn’t off-limits to me. I never saw her that way. I always knew she was mine. It was just a matter of time. That time is still not right now, but that doesn’t mean I won’t play with her while the clock ticks.

Her head tilts to the side, her long teal hair floating to the cushion of the sofa. “And why’s that?”

I bring my hands to her thighs and spread her wider, grinding her against my hard dick. Fuck. Her weight feels perfect on top of mine, her skin as smooth as it looks. She feels like cashmere on a cold day. “Because you’re legal.”

“Aww.” She drops her lower lip and I force myself to not bite it off. “Big bad Keaton Cicero who murders people”—she leans down lower until her lips touch the shell of my ear—“and other things.” My blood turns cold. Pushing up, she wiggles her brows down at me. “Was waiting for little old me to turn *legal age*.”

My chest rumbles from my chuckle, but her smirk slides off her face when my hand flies to her throat and I throw her onto the sofa, forcing her legs open, and rest against her pussy. “I don’t hurt minors.”

Cartier is as wild as they come. She shakes her ass around the place recklessly because she knows that if anyone so much as stares at her too long, bodies drop. There’s a kind of stupidity that comes from that kind of power, though, and the girl knows exactly how to utilize that. “Then hurt me.” Case in point. I didn’t want to bring up the fact that the little bitch went and gave her virginity away like it wasn’t the one thing boys and grown men in Kiznitch hungered for. She’s the fucking holy grail of our generation, and she just let someone take it like she’s Basic Betty shaking

her pom-poms after her boyfriend Little Dick Declan scores within the final minutes.

“I’ll just have to—” My fingers trail down to the hem of her skirt delicately, tugging up the leather until it’s over her ass. When the tips of my fingers brush against the smoothness of her pussy, I smirk. “—Fuck him out of you.”

She peers back at me with her deceiving as fuck baby doe eyes, slowly bringing her hands to the base of my hoodie that she’s wearing and pulling it above her head. Her ocean hair spreads out like a tidal wave before she discards it onto the floor beside us. The muscles in my thighs tense as prickles of electricity flare through my veins. Flicking the corset track undone that’s tightened down her sternum, she wraps her fingers around my chin when I hover over her. “You can try.”

My hand flies to her throat and I force her lips up onto mine. Fuck. Her lips taste like candy, but her tongue is a weapon. Her thighs tighten around my waist, and with her leather skirt already pushed up, I don’t even bother to remove it. Flicking my buttons off my jeans, I push them down just enough.

She pulls back enough to not be too far. “Condom?” Her heavy breathing lands on my damp lips.

“The fuck I look like to you? Killian? I don’t walk around with condoms in my pocket.” Bringing my hand around the back of her ass, I slide my index finger down the crack, between her wet folds, and dip inside. Warmth envelops my finger and I moan slightly, biting down a growl. “I’ll pull out. Not interested in copy and pasting you.”

She giggles, but her hands squeeze around my neck. I’m momentarily distracted by the contrast of our skin. Mine heavily inked, hers flawlessly natural.

Spreading her legs wide and kneeling between them, I press my thumb against her lip. “Open.”

Her puffy lips part, her eyes staying up on mine, as they wrap around the base of my thumb. She knows exactly what she’s doing, and she does it confidently, as if she’s played this scene inside her head multiple times.

So fucking cocky with the fact that I’d let her have my dick.

I shake my head. “Tsk, ts, Tigger. You gotta follow instructions. Open wide.” Her lips part again, and I bring both of my fingers into her mouth,

pushing them down her throat. The corner of her lips curves in triumph, and my eyes narrow. No gag reflex. I'll slap her around for that later.

"Spit." She leans up on her elbows and spits into the palm of my hand without breaking eye contact and I roll it over my head, licking her leftover saliva off my palm before leaning back down on top of her and pushing near her entrance. She's still staring at me with a cunning glare as if she knows something I don't. This comes as no surprise. We fuck with minds, Cartier dances around ours. She's not like any other girl.

"Well, com—" Her mouth slams closed when I drive inside, only I feel the tear of a barrier as soon as my balls hit her ass cheeks.

My hand is on her throat, forcing her eyes up to mine. A single tear rolls down the side of her temple, but her mouth is slammed closed, as if it physically pains her to move an inch. Defiance is engraved over her features. Over her cheeks where two perfectly deep dimples crease any time she smiles. Over the slight flip of her upper lip, which only seems to make them appear larger, and finally those eyes. The same color as her hair, with lashes as dark as her natural roots.

"What the fuck, Cartier!" I growl over her lips, careful to whisper so I don't awaken the big bad wolf simmering his rage upstairs. My lip curls upward, but it's not from disgust. "A virgin?"

She forces her face out of my grip, and I release her throat, bringing my hand to her upper thigh.

"Take it." Her words clench around my heart the same way her pussy does my cock. "I don't want anyone else to have it, so please, Keaton. Take it."

I circle my hips slightly, testing her threshold. The corner of her eye winces, but her hips meet mine hungrily.

"Pretty sure it's already mine," I growl over her lips, catching her gasps with my teeth.

Pulling back, her tongue sneaks out to trace the sharp line of my jaw before she nibbles on my earlobe. "For now."

I dive deeper inside of her, and she sinks her teeth into the curve of my shoulder mid-yelp. Good. "Always gotta be a fucking brat." I pull out slowly, hissing when the friction suffocates me further. "This is definitely mine." Her fingers dive into the flesh of my shoulders as I pick up the pace. I watch as emotions pass over her face. First, pain. More pain as her white teeth sink into her bottom lip to stop her screaming. When she finally

relaxes her thighs further, giving me more range of motion, her eyes roll to the back of her head and, I swear to God, in this moment I know. I know I'm going to ruin, fuck, break, and mend this girl back together.

Licking her salty skin over her collarbone, I bite down roughly. "You look fucking perfect beneath me, baby." Goose bumps rapture over her flesh and I smirk against her neck. "Yeah. You're not going any-fucking-where."

I pick her up from her waist and roll her on top of me so I'm sitting on the sofa. She moves her long hair away from her face, her fingers coming to my cheek. I want to pull away from her touch because I hate how much it feels good. I come to her when I need her, but being inside of her feels more like her coming to me.

"You're in control. Ride it." She slowly lifts herself up halfway and then lowers back down. "Fuck." I lean back against the sofa, squeezing her waist. "You've got sixty seconds to get used to my dick before I'm fucking you exactly how I want to fuck you, Cartier."

"Bu—"

"Fifty-four..."

Her eyes widen as her fingers lock behind my neck. She rolls herself over me awkwardly, as if she's trying to find a rhythm.

I can't even hide my laugh.

She punches me in the chest. "I'm fucking learning! Are you going to teach me, or should I go elsewhere?"

My laughter instantly dies, the corner of my lip curling. "You go anywhere else and I'll kill him." I rest my hands on her fat ass and I direct her over my girth. "*And you fucking know I will.*"

She rolls her eyes, her hands diving into my hair. She tugs it at the same time as her abs tense when she rides over me once again. "It's like dancing." She smirks, raising a perfectly arched brow.

I stand from the sofa, being sure to hold her by the bottom of her ass and direct her on top of the piano that's nestled in the corner of the room. For once, I'm thankful for the random clutter her parents furnished in this house to replace their love. I lay her flat over the base, running the palm of my hand over her perfect tits. Slapping the side, her cleavage jiggles, and I suck her nipple into my mouth while looking up at her.

She veers up farther on her elbows, her legs clenching around my waist. "Oh... that's..." My teeth close around the soft nub and she jumps in shock.

I flick my tongue over the tip while keeping my teeth closed around it and her face relaxes, her head rolling to the side. Her muscles relax as a lazy smirk pulls over her mouth. I've been inside this chick, and fuck... it feels primal. Like every single part of me wants to make sure no one comes near her.

"First rule of fucking..." I murmur, dropping kisses over her ribs and ignoring the way whatever perfume she wears intoxicates me further. "You can fuck like a whore without being one."

"Mmmm, sounds fun." Her legs part slightly as I circle my tongue around her protruding hip bone. Cartier is an adrenaline junkie; she always has been. A sucker for the thrill. So I'm aware that I could very well be enabling an intoxicating addiction for her. I just can't seem to give a fuck.

"What are you doing?" Her voice is low as I lick a trail down to the smooth skin between her thighs, bringing my hands to her knees and parting them farther. "Keaton, I just bled everywhere."

"Exactly." I flick my tongue over her clit and her elbows give way as she drops to the wooden lid. I twirl my tongue in slow circles before dragging it over both sides of her pussy, sucking up the smudged blood between her thighs. The taste of metal slides down my throat and I groan, bringing my mouth back to her clit. I suck, lick, and fuck her with my tongue like I know she needs. Because as much as I want to break her, I know she needs this. I can't be selfish with her right now—just this once. And by this once, I mean the next five minutes.

She starts twisting and turning, her legs slipping beneath my hands from sweat. Her back arches off the wood and I bring my other over her lower belly and push down. Her body trembles beneath my grip, but I don't let up. I cover her pussy with my mouth and press my tongue against her clit before dipping into her slit. She loses it, her fingers clawing at my scalp and uncontrolled moans splitting from her sinful lips.

Standing to my full height, I slap her pussy. "Shut up. Would hate for your brother to see what I'm doing with his precious little sister."

"I want a turn..." She pushes back up on her elbows, her foot against my cock.

"Ever sucked a man's dick before? And careful with how you answer because I'm already treading a fine line with fucking you how you *need* to be fucked, and how I *actually do* fuck."

Her hair is wild, spilling around her sharp shoulders and drawing attention to her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. The sheen of sweat glistening against her smooth tanned skin isn't helping either. As of right now, I know what Cartier Nero looks like after she has been fucked, and now I'm pretty sure I'm going to make sure no one else ever gets to see it.

Her head slowly moves from side to side, a shy smile slowly curling upward. "No, but I watch porn."

I chuckle, looking to the side briefly while grabbing behind her thighs and yanking her down the piano farther until she's perfectly in line with my cock. "Unfortunately for you, what I'm into, you won't learn on Pornhub." Running the tip of my finger down her damp folds, I rub her cum over the head of my dick before sucking off the rest.

Her eyes widen, her cheeks swelling from her wicked smile. "I want to taste me."

Fuck it. I push back inside of her, an animalistic hiss tearing out of me when she drops back onto the piano, a slight moan leaving her.

My hand finds the curve of her throat, and I squeeze. "Shut up. Don't make a sound."

Her lips roll behind her teeth and I grind into her harder. Deep thrusts until the piano legs squeak against the marble floor. She feels like sin wrapped angel dust. I can't fucking see straight as I continue to drive into her, using the leverage from the piano as an anchor for my savagery.

"Good girl." I release her throat and dip my fingers into her mouth. She clenches around my cock and I feel my balls stiffen. "You want more?"

She doesn't answer, so I slow my thrusts. A second of her eyes on mine, never leaving each other as if every primal part of us is deep-rooted within each other.

"Keaton!" she argues softly, and a light blush spreads over her face.

"Use your fucking words, Cartier. Use them. What do you want?" I lay my arm over her lower belly to hold her in place as I continue to push inside of her.

"I want to come."

"Yeah? Where?" I lick my lips as sweat rolls down my forehead. The restraint of wanting to leave bruises over her perfect skin slowly wanes the longer I'm inside her.

"On your dick." My mind short circuits. I take hold of the front of her throat again and direct her up, dropping us to the floor until she's straddling

me again. This time she sits up, looking down at me with fire burning behind her blue flames. I slap her hard against her ass cheek and squeeze. “Then fuck it until you break it.” Sweat slides down her slick skin, over her little belly button, and the curve lines of her abs. She rolls over me expertly, as if she’s been riding dick for years.

“Fuck.” I squeeze her hips so hard I know they’ll bruise. *Good.* Her thighs tense around my waist again.

“Shit—” she breathes, leaning down and bringing her lips to mine. “I’m —”

I suck her earlobe into my mouth and whisper, “Come for me like a good little girl.” Her muscles release, and her body jolts on top of me as her eyes stay on mine. I ride it out, watching as her eyes widen and her mouth forms an O. Hot liquid pools between us as she falls apart on top of me.

I lift her up like a doll and direct her down, tucking her hair behind her ear. I can see she’s tired. “Gonna have to work on that stamina, baby.” Her eyes light up when her petite hand comes to my cock. Her fingers don’t touch each other when she glides the head over her lips.

“Blood?”

“Mmhmm.” I tuck her hair behind her ear again. “You look really good in red.”

Her mouth curves before she slides me into the warmth of it, watching me for cues. She’s a fucking natural.

“Fuck!” My hand is in her hair, gently massaging her scalp. *That was a fluke.* “Good. You—” She swallows me whole, and I watch as every inch of my length disappears down her throat. She bats her lashes up at me, flicking her tongue over my crown and sucking her way back up.

I loop her hair around my wrist and yank her head up until I rest on her mouth. “What the fuck is that? You lie to me?”

“No, you fucking idiot. Now lie down and shut up.” Fuck. She’s gonna be a problem. Warmth cloaks me again and all thoughts fly out of my mind. She moves over my length, sucking and teasing until I feel myself build. She pumps me with her hand and sucks one of my balls into her mouth, flicking her tongue over and I lose it. Hot cum shoots out and spills over her face as she licks up every single drop like it’s fucking dessert.

She swipes my cum off her cheek and sucks it into her mouth. “We taste good.”

I laugh, and watch as she rolls to the side, grabbing my hoodie to throw over her head. “Pretty sure Kyryn is going to kill us both if he comes down here and sees this.”

I reach for her aimlessly and catch the sleeve of the hoodie, stopping her in her tracks. “I’m serious, Cartier. He’s not playing this time. You definitely won’t be riding in Mayhem.”

Her smile falls, and sadness sweeps over her face. “I know. But I’ll keep myself busy.” I stand to my feet, shoving my jeans back on. She tilts her head and bats her lashes up at me, tapping my chest with her tiny fist. “You don’t need to underestimate me. I can take care of myself.”

I grin down at her, pulling her into my body from her ass. “Happy birthday, Tigger.”

She swipes up her leather skirt, smiling at me from over her shoulder. “Thanks for the gift.”



Three

Cartier

The morning sun burns a fire in my room as my eyes crack open, my arm covering my forehead. My muscles throb as if I did a full day, all over body workout. *Oops*. I fucked Keaton last night—or he fucked me—and now I have to cover up the bruises on my throat and legs before I can sweet talk my psycho brother to not send me away to some secret society nunnery in the ass crack of nowhere just because he can't handle the fact that his little sister is having sex. And partying.

I stretch my arms above my head, reaching for my phone and opening Instagram. I don't have "friends" at this school—for a reason. Kyrin either sleeps with them or kills them, so I learned a long time ago that it's easier to keep people at arm's length. People want to be friends with me so I'm popular, but I never keep anyone close. I never make someone feel like they're important to me. I have my sisters with Midnight Mayhem, and The Brothers. I don't need anyone else and don't think I could fit them in anyway.

Opening Instagram, I flick through my home screen. I only follow people I want to see on my page, which is pretty much just everyone in Midnight Mayhem. No one from my school. The fact that I have over ten

thousand followers already and haven't even debuted with Midnight Mayhem tells me that most of the school and their friends follow me, though.

I pause on a shot someone took of Keaton last week. He's on his matte black KTM performing a vault. No shirt, black helmet, ripped jeans, and heavy boots. Stupid motherfucker not wearing gear with that particular trick. Stupidity aside, I know he's everything I ever wanted but shouldn't have.

Flipping to selfie mode, I take a shot of my eyes only with my mouth covered from my satin black sheets. It's close up, and since it's first thing in the morning, the morning sun brightens my features even more than usual. My eyes look inhuman, they could rival Killian's.

I type out the caption, quoting a famous line from a Ciara song, before tapping Post.

Swinging my leg over the edge of the bed, I shove my sheets off and make my way into the bathroom. I need to cover the evidence, and I need to do it well. I swear Kyrin can sniff shade out better than a Beagle.

Once I've done my best at covering the bruises by some magical tricks called color correction and full coverage concealer, I rough my hair up further to make it look like I just woke up before treading down the long hallway and circular staircase.

"Morning!" I bounce into the kitchen just as Kyrin turns, holding a mug of coffee.

He crosses his legs at his ankles and watches me over the rim. "You're awfully happy for someone whose future hangs in the balance." I ignore the pang of hurt from his words, taking the juice out of the fridge and flicking off the lid.

I place it on the counter, pouring a glass. "Kind of hoped you'd bring me with you so you could watch me all you want." My brother is my protector, my best friend, and my nemesis. He needs to find a girl or boyfriend ASAP because his mood swings are starting to get old.

He snorts, and my eyes snap up at him. "Not fucking likely, Princess, but nice try." He tips out his coffee in the sink just as Keaton drops his bags near the threshold of where the kitchen and the family room meet.

I make it my job to not pay him any attention, or the way my body temperature just skyrocketed.

"You're an asshole."

Kyrin closes the distance between us, pressing a gentle kiss on my forehead. "Only to those I care about." He steps away. "Gotta make a phone call to *a* King."

"Kingston can't help us!" I call out at his retreating back. My eyes finally land on Keaton and searing hot heat coils around my veins with a vice-like grip. It's like every memory from last night reappears and caresses over the bruises on my body.

Every kiss.

Every touch.

Every... fucking... thing.

I gulp.

"What are you thinking about?" he teases, making his way to where I stand. He's wearing dark jeans and a white tee with a leather hooded jacket over top, and I swear to God...

He reaches around my body from behind and my eyes close from the way my body pulls me toward his. He's a lot taller than me, and that's saying something because I'm not short. Standing at an average five-eight, he must be around six-four. But he's bigger than Ky, Kill, and King. He always has been.

I feel the mist of his breath touch the nape of my neck. "Gonna need you to answer, baby..." He brings his hand to my upper thigh, where his fingertips graze the inside of my silk pajama bottoms. No panties, obviously so the kitty can breathe overnight. I am really wishing I did now.

"Uh, I—"

"Your words, Cartier..." His lips graze my spine just as he guides his fingers over my clit.

My knees give way and I collapse into his chest. "About last night."

"Mmhhh..." He circles my clit with just enough pressure to make my hips buckle forward for more. I squeeze his jeans in my hands and press my ass against his crotch. The thick swell of his cock grazes against my back and I go to turn in his grip, ready to do something. Anything. All I know is that I need him. But he stops me with a firm grip around the back of my neck, forcing me up against the counter.

He presses against my butt. "Stay."

I grind against him as he circles harder and faster, his tongue sliding against my neck.

At any second, Kyrin is going to walk around that corner and catch us, but I can't seem to stop. My eyes roll to the back of my head as his other hand travels up my belly, squeezing my nipples.

"This..." he whispers into my ear, all while never letting up, "will be the last time I fuck you for you. Next time I see you? It's gonna be for *me*." His finger slides between my folds and I moan softly, just as his other hand slams over my mouth. I panic, breathing in deeply to suck in as much air as I can as I feel myself dangerously close to falling over the edge. His finger curls inside of me while his thumb rubs my clit faster. I feel myself slowly coming apart as my knees shake and my legs start to give way. Pleasure splinters through my body and jolts me forward so violently my legs turn to jelly and I slowly fall to the floor. Keaton catches me, holding me up in place as the aftershocks continue to roll through me from my head down to my toes.

Retracting his hand, he brings his wet finger to my lips. "This is what *I* do to you. No one else." Then he reaches for the juice with his hand that was on my lips, just as Kyrin rounds the corner while still looking at his phone.

He glares up at us just as Keaton casually but not quickly, rolls to the opposite side.

"I have shit taste in people," Kyrin complains, and I'm seriously contemplating my choices lately.

Keaton holds my stare, stepping backward against the counter and bringing his fingers to his mouth, sucking me off him. "What a shame. Can't relate."

For the love of God...

They both left not long after Keaton's near miss with finger fucking me in the kitchen before licking away any evidence right in front of my brother. Hours pass and I still don't know what Kyrin's punishment is going to be. Maybe he'll just let it go and leave me to entertain myself the only way I know how, since I can't join the family business. Feeling tired of overthinking, I busy myself with cleaning the penthouse. Picking up the collection of littered Solo cups and swiping the dried cocaine off the tables out on the patio near the infinity pool. It's not until I'm climbing the stairs, ready to take a long hot bath, that my phone rings.

Dread punches through my heart. I pull my phone out, pushing my hair to the side. “Hey, Mom.”

“How was your brother?” I can hear talking in the background. She’s most likely at a bar without my father.

“You know... he was Kyrin. He wasn’t happy with my activities, so I’m waiting to see what kind of punishment they all have up their sleeve for me this time.”

She goes quiet, and a door closes in the background. “Is this the route you want to go? You know you can ride in Mayhem. You don’t need to pretend that you don’t want it, Cartier. Regardless of what your brother is making you agree to.” I know what she’s implying, and as much as I do appreciate it, I know that riding isn’t something I want to do in Mayhem. I enjoy it too much. None of The Brothers ride for themselves anymore because their hobby has turned into work. Except maybe Keaton, but he hasn’t uploaded any new content on Instagram of him stunting in a while. Not since he dropped into Crusty Demon’s and fucked around with them for a night a couple of months ago.

I stare blankly at the abstract art hanging on the wall directly opposite me. Strokes of black, beige, and gold that at some angles can resemble a cow staring at you. Honestly, the money this stupid piece cost my mother... “No, I’m sure. I can’t be part of the show, Mom. For one,” I say, huffing while continuing into my bedroom, “I don’t want to see Kyrin having sex with someone. I know that never bothered other older generational people, but it bothers me—and him—and two, I’d rather just wait.”

“Honey,” she says, and as soon as I hear her sugary tone, I roll my eyes. “I just want what’s best for you. We all do.”

“Mom, it’s fine. Hey! I’ve got to go. Tell Dad I miss him.”

“Will do, baby. Have a good night.”

I toss my phone onto the marble counter and peer up at myself in the mirror that occupies the entire wall in the bathroom. Shit. My mom is smart, but she dumbs herself down. Maybe she’s sniffing around something that I don’t know. I don’t get that from her. Or much of anything of myself. For one, my jaw is slightly angular, thanks to genetics probably on my sperm donor’s side, and on some angles, it could look too sharp. Thanks to my eyes, they tend to soften my features enough because of my boyish jawline. My cheekbones are soft, free of any imperfections, which I know I

get from her. Everyone thinks she gets Botox, but we know she doesn't. Not like Dahlia anyway.

Pushing off the counter, I quickly undress and dip into the bath, sighing when the hot water reduces all the stress from my muscles. I scrub, rest, nap, and then wake when the water is cold. Tugging the plug, I slip straight into my silk robe and brush my teeth. I need sleep since I didn't get much last night, yet when I slide between my silk sheets, I can't ignore the way I ache to have him here with me again.



I remember watching Emily Rose and freaking out about the time that she kept waking in the movie. Three a.m., the smell of something burning, and dusted sulfur. Those were the tell-tale signs of demon possession. I couldn't sleep for days. I had snuck into the cinema in the basement and hid behind the chairs throughout the entire movie. When it finished, The Brothers all found me rocking in the corner with my arms wrapped around my knees, whispering, "It's not real. They're lying." Kyrin got mad because he knew I'd be sleeping in his bed for the next week, Killian laughed at me, King shook his head in disappointment, and Keaton carried me upstairs like I was incapable of walking myself. Which I probably was.

I reach aimlessly for my phone, knocking over my lamp in the process while shoving my eye covers above my head. We're going to ignore the time on the clock right now for the sake of me being home alone.

Unknown number.

I snicker, my eyes burning against the bright screen. "Figures you crazy bitches call me at the devil's hour." I swipe to the side and answer. "Nero."

"Hello, Cartier." A voice says smoothly through the other end.

A chill snaps over my spine and I snuggle back beneath the warmth of my sheets, clutching some kind of false sense of security. I stare up at the ceiling even though the room is pitch black. Swallowing, I whisper, "This is she."

"Do you know who I am, Poppet?" Oh great. Now what.

I pause. "I do. I guess I'm confused as to why you're calling me?" I ignore the time now; this might be far worse.

"We have a proposition for you. I don't think you're going to want to turn it down." I pause for a few seconds, counting to four. I don't want to sound desperate, but also *suck my ass, Kyrin!* Ha!

"I'm listening." I shuffle up my bed farther, squeezing my phone in my hand. I'm suddenly ten espressos deep inside my mind.

"There's an opening for you, are you interested?"

I swallow past the excitement that has me in a chokehold. "Yes—" I breathe out, before trauma rolls in. "Wait, I just, I don't want to be part of the final show."

"We're aware of yours and your brothers' worries. Which is fine, but you won't be touching each other, and we've done it for generations, Cartier."

"Well." I try to hide my distaste. I don't want to ruin this opportunity. Maybe this is why Kyrin left without telling me what my punishment was. He was trumped, and now he's sulking. Ha! Makes sense. My mind travels back to the conversation at hand. "No offense, but I'm also a lot closer to The Brothers than other sisters have been in previous generations. My brother and I have a typical brother-sister friendship. There's no..." I stop my words, struggling to find my way around the next ones.

"Incest?" she finishes, and it's the nonchalant tone that should shock me, but it doesn't.

"Yes..." My hand lands on my lower belly where it stirs like a whirlwind. *Did I eat?*

"We can move around that. For now, your first day will be tonight. You will be allocated a driver from now until you have fulfilled your three years. We haven't had anyone of this generation with us. The last one was Delila, so I have to ask, you understand the commitment?"

"Yes," I say, and the words float out of my mouth along with any control I have over my life for the next three years.

"I will see you tomorrow at four p.m. Get your rest, oh, and Cartier? This is a secret which will require a blood oath." Wait. So Kyrin doesn't know?

"Everyone except The Brothers?" I must have misunderstood.

"No, including The Brothers." Dammit. I can't gloat.

"Okay."

“See you tomorrow.”

I hang up my phone and lay it on my chest, blinking through the conversation. Did I just get everything I’ve ever wanted?

I have twelve hours until I’ll be collected. I need to get food, coffee, and do some serious shopping beforehand. There is no way I’m going into my first day with a head full of anxiety.

I make my way down to the lobby, waving at the doorman before hitting the side streets. I find myself outside Banjos.

It’s a Hampton’s style café that’s situated right on the corner. It has a small American flag beside a Colombian one, side by side. They have the best coffee in New York, and no one can make me think otherwise.

Pushing the door open, I hear him before I see him. “Honestly, can you push it harder?”

I slam the door while glaring at him over my Prada sunglasses. “I think I could.”

Nial flicks his under nail with his other finger, his top lip curled in a sneer. “Bitch.”

I bounce toward the counter until I’m close enough to wrap my arms around his neck and plant a fat kiss on his perfect forehead. “Your favorite one, at least?” Nial ignores my *no friends* rule. He doesn’t even go to school in the city. It’s different.

He unties his apron and places it on top of the display counter where small gourmet tea cakes and freshly dusted croissants lie in perfect order. “Unfortunately.” He pushes through the barrier, grabbing his purse. “Mama! I’m leaving. Be back soon!”

His mama cusses off in explanatory words as I hook my arm in his and pull him out of the shop while graciously removing my coffee out of his hands.

“You know, you really do need new friends. I can’t be the only one continuously doing this shit with you, damn.” Nial is one year older than me and attends a private prep school not far from here. He says he hates it and how fucked up the students are. I tell him they can’t be any worse than Mayhem, but apparently, he says they may be.

“I don’t want new friends.” I take his hand with mine, just as the black city car rolls to a stop on the curb. I open the door and gesture inside. “Well, come on, I need to tell you what my dumb ass signed up for.”

He side-eyes me with his bright blue eyes, sliding into the back seat while reaching for the decanter of whiskey and squeezing off the lid. Would I have the same driver after this afternoon, or would I have a new one? Kyrin rotates between three and they're all bland so I won't complain. "What did you do!" His eyes widen, and the whites of them are a complete contrast to his brown skin. "Or *who* did you do?"

"I—" I rest my head against the back of the chair as the car pulls away. "The latter we will get back to, but the important thing... I'm joining Mayhem in three years, but my brother doesn't know it. I have to do some weird ass training before I can ever *join*." I cross my legs. "I'm not supposed to be telling you this, but I haven't taken the blood oath yet so it's not like they can kill me over it yet or anything. Oh! And I'm pretty sure this training school or whatever is going to be a lot worse"—I stare at him—"than your prep school."

He raises a finger, the one with a chunky metal ring on it. "One, I can introduce you to a bunch of annoyingly dominant boys who will make you change your mind on that, but two, first give me details. On the fucking too!"

"Dominant boys, huh? Let us meet." I tell him about the phone call, skipping my Emily Rose trauma. I miss some bits because naturally, I always find myself protecting Kiznitch and Mayhem. I don't like people knowing everything I know even if I do trust them. Once we've pulled up to the mall, he's up to speed—only a fabricated version. I love Nial. He and I have been friends for three years, I would say best friends, but there are some things that he can't know for his own protection.

"Your brother is hot, and I would dick him down from now until next week..." I start to roll my eyes. After me complaining about Kyrin, this is what he gives me. "But I respect you more than I'm thirsty for him." We move through every shop until I've spent my full and my feet ache and we grab a quick lunch before my driver takes him back to the café with a swift *I'll see you tomorrow*.

Then I'm alone again. With my thoughts.

The city car pulls up to the apartment building and I sigh, pushing open my door.

"I'll have your bags brought up, Miss Nero."

"Thank you." I pat him on the chest and make my way through the swinging doors that lead into the old Victorian style hotel. The word *Vitiosis*

is carved in cursive over the back wall of the reception, and every now and then I've thought of different ways to pronounce it.

Once I reach our penthouse, I remove my Louis Vuitton scarf, placing it on the granite table and flick the lights on in the lounge. I stop when I see someone sitting on the single leather sofa with his foot resting on his knee. He's wearing jeans, a white shirt, and a leather jacket. He has tattoos sneaking out from beneath his cuffs and—okay, if he was about to kidnap me, I'm not sure that I'd run. If he is here to kidnap me, I'm fucked. There's no way to get hold of The Brothers, no one knows I'm in trouble, and if he managed to get through security to get here, he's obviously good at what he does.

Sighing, I stomp into the sitting room and collapse onto the seat beside him. "Can I pour a drink before I die? I don't usually drink, but I think I deserve it."

He watches me closely, his fingers pressing together in a slight prayer. He has to be around my brother's age, but there is something about him that is familiar.

I tilt my head, scanning his body. Nope. Not familiar. It's just that same aura that The Brothers hold. You can tell a lot about a man who sits in silence and doesn't need his words to frighten you. Men like Keaton.

"Sure," he answers smoothly, as if he's not in the apartment building of one of the most feared family organizations known to man. I wonder if he knows? Maybe not. Clearly, he was hired.

I make my way to the small alcohol table that's pressed against the window walls that overlook the bright city. It's slightly away from the pool and patio area. I love New York City. I think I always will.

Popping off the cap to the bottle of some aged whiskey that I can't be fucked reading, I point to him. "How did you get in?" My lips wrap around the tip, and I have flashbacks of Keaton's cock in my mouth. *Goddammit*. I stop talking and squeeze my eyes closed as the liquid leaves a trail of fire down my throat before settling at the center of my belly. "Let me guess... You're part of Patience?"

He doesn't answer, his eyes on mine.

I click my fingers together. "Or they hired you, didn't they?" I dance my way back to my spot on the sofa.

Seconds pass before he leans forward, the corner of his mouth curling. "You think I'm here to kill you."

I wave my hand. “Well, yes.” Crossing my leg over the other, I twirl my foot around as my skirt slips up my thigh. Shivers break out when I see his eyes fall to my exposed skin.

His tongue sneaks out, dampening his lip and leaving a gloss that glistens against the dim lighting. He’s borderline beautiful with a jaw curved all the right ways, nice and tight, and eyes that the longer I lose myself in them, the more I begin to question whether or not I want them to see me naked. I really should ignore the way they feel crawling over my body.

He looks to the left and I catch the shadows over the side of his jaw before he comes back to me. Pushing up from his seat, he takes calculated steps my way, and the closer he gets, the harder I find it to breathe. If I’m going to die, I’d rather do it on my terms.

He leans down, resting his fists on the cushion of the sofa, and I crawl backward until I’m looking up at him from below. How the fuck did I find myself on my back? “If you’re going to kill me, you’ll have to fuck me first.”

His lips widen, and he flashes me a bright smile, showing his straight teeth. “Done.” Then his lips crash onto mine, wrapping his arm around my back to lift me off the sofa to carry me upstairs. His lips move with mine, his tongue licking dominantly, paving the way like it knows the streets already. I squeeze my legs tighter around his waist as we fall to my bed.

He leans up and pulls my silk skirt up, flicking off the button to his jeans before removing his shirt from above his head.

Shit. His abs are *tight*. They may even be leaner than Kill’s.

He cages me in with each fist pillowed into the mattress on either side of my head and I can’t help myself anymore. I run my hand down his abs, batting my lashes up at him. “What?”

He digs his fingers into my thigh as he lifts it to sit over his hip. “Nothing. Just wondering why I always attract the crazy ones.” Then he slides inside my gap and I gasp, my head rolling back against the mattress. *Oh God.*

“Fuck,” he hisses over my ear, and it sends tingles down the crack of my spine. “So fucking tight.”

I lean up and catch his lip between my teeth, wrapping my legs around his waist as he pulls out and sinks back in. My nails dig into his tight back every time he retracts, and when he slams into me again, I feel him rub

against the ache screaming to be released deep inside of me. I go through the motions of building, and then crashing, and then building again—only to crash.

He picks up the pace. Faster, harder, while kissing me against the side of my neck. This may be the stupidest thing I have ever done, but if I'm going to die, I'd rather go after being fucked. It takes away the pain of never seeing anyone again.

He lowers his lip to my nipple, sucking it into his mouth as my back arches off the bed. "Shit—I—" My muscles release all of the pent-up adrenaline gathered in my belly, and it rushes to the tips of my toes in time for my orgasm to plow through me in aftershocks, rocking me back and forward until I almost black out from the release.

He falls beside me, his jeans partially down his thighs and my skirt tugged up around my waist. We take a moment to stare at each other in silence. Now that his hair is a mess, he looks even younger. Maybe he's the same age as me. His mouth widens and he barks out a boyish laugh that makes him look much more harmless than what I walked in on minutes ago. Rolling off my bed, he reaches for a packet of smokes in his back pocket and bites one between his teeth, shaking his head.

I push myself up, lying sideways while he moves confidently around my space, falling onto the single sofa that's tucked away in the darkest corner of the room. I watch as the ember on the end of his cigarette burns each time he sucks on it.

"Of course, I had to fuck you before you kidnapped me." I'm the first to break the silence, scolding myself while ignoring the pang of guilt. Guilt for what? It's not like I did anything wrong. But that's the thing about guilt, it's the emotion that tells you how you feel without you knowing it. "By the way, that's one of the very things wrong with me as a person." I know the time is near too, for when I have to meet my driver, but for right now, I couldn't care. I'm a little pissed, though. I really wanted to know what these next three years entailed. This death thing is kind of killing my vibe.

"I'm not gonna kill you," he answers behind a chuckle, flicking the ash off his cigarette into the glass of water on the small table beside him.

"Kidnap me?" I've been in this world since I was born, around men like him all my life. He is a killer. You can smell it on his cologne.

"Nup, not even that." Seconds pass as I watch him smoke his cigarette. He pushes up from the chair, swoops up his discarded t-shirt, and throws it

over his shoulder. As he drops his cigarette into the glass of water, his eyes darken on me. “Your brother hired me to watch you. Didn’t want you to find out but figured why the fuck not. I’m not keen on following you around like a lost puppy, so if you could just—” He drops a card onto my bed. “Text or call me when you’re in trouble, it’ll save us a lot of bullshit, you feel?” My mouth hangs open and I fight with myself to not spew out the words that are teasing the tip of my tongue.

He stops just as he opens the door, looking at me over his shoulder. “Pretty sure we’re gonna see each other often, so feel free to—” He gestures up and down my body with a nudge of his head. “Stay like that.” Then the door closes behind him and I’m left staring at a black card the color of matte satin with gloss wording over the top that reads **ELI REBELLIS**.



Four

Cartier

A black city car rolls to a stop outside the hotel, and I swipe my sweaty palms down my thighs as I stare at the chrome handle. I don't know anything about whatever the hell I'm about to walk into. I'm hoping it doesn't have anything to do with riding, since I want to keep that purely for enjoyment, but then what else does that leave me with? Most of the other acts are taken, and I'm not dancing. Not because I'm bad at it, it's just that—no.

I pull the door open and slide into the back seat, crossing my legs.

"Hello, darling. How are you feeling?" Eyes the color of warm whiskey, and skin smooth like silk. Delila doesn't look a day over thirty.

"Good." The car pulls away from the curb.

"Surprised to see me?" she asks, slowly bringing her cigarette to her lips and puffing on the end. The smell lingers in the small space like burned lungs. It's going to take at least three washes to get it out of my hair.

"No." I shuffle farther back into my chair. "Since I spoke with you on the phone."

She studies me closely, her slanted eyes shifting around my body carefully before settling back on my face. "This is going to be perfect for

you, Cartier. You're going to be the best we've had. Tell me—" she adds with a softer tone, crossing her leg over the other to flash her Valentino spiked heels with little chains that hang off the back. "Just how much have they told you? I suspected your brother would have filled you in with everything that goes on. We need you on the inside."

I shake my head until my hair falls over my shoulders. "I know enough, but what I don't know is how I'm going to help by being here." I sigh, turning my head to look out at the passing streetlights. "Kind of hoped I'd be able to do exciting things for Mayhem, not basic bookkeeping shit."

She clucks her tongue, drawing me back to her while squeezing my phone in my hand to calm my disappointment. "Boring bookkeeping shit? Okay, Nero. I'll keep that in mind." She stubs out her cigarette on the astray and looks up at me from hooded eyes. "I can assure you, what we need you for is not boring, nor does it have anything to do with bookkeeping."

I chew on my lower lip. Maybe it is exciting.

"Then what?" My eyes narrow. "What do you need me to do?"

Delila has always been the woman no one wanted to mess with. She is the ground Midnight Mayhem performs on. Everything ends and begins with her. I should question why she's agreeing to allow me to join Midnight Mayhem and what she wants me to do, but knowing Delila, she's ten steps ahead of whatever I'm thinking about.

We continue onto the highway, the same one that takes us toward The Village.

"Did your mother ever tell you that you were spoken for?"

"In what way?" I ask, clenching my thighs together. After my sexcapade with Eli Rebellis earlier, I'm not sure I know who I am anymore, let alone who I'm spoken for.

"We need you to fill big shoes, Cartier. The biggest ones we have."

"Sounds serious!" I widen my eyes at her, a smirk on my mouth.

"You've always been so cute, Cartier, but I see the fight behind your eyes. You're always hungry for more and to feed your beast is loyalty to Kiznitch. To your Brothers."

I shuffle around my chair as the car comes to a stop. I was too busy judging Delila to notice where we had come to. "I would have preferred to ride for Mayhem."

"Oh, you can ride, but you will not be riding for Mayhem." Both doors open, but I don't move. "You won't be in the shows."

I toss my hands up. “Then what *will* I be doing?”

The corner of her mouth curls upward as she swipes her handbag from beside her and hooks it over her arm. “You, our Little Ice Queen, will be just that—” She pauses, one perfect Valentino heel outside the door while the other stays in. “Come on. I believe you’ve already seen this place during one of your many... adventures.” Sliding out my side, loose gravel crunches beneath the soles of my Vans as I shut the car door. A large concrete building sits in front of a lake that backs up to a high cliff. I tilt my head up to see the exact spot I rode to when I stole Kyrin’s bike for the first time ever, coming back to the building. Tinted glass walls overlook the vast driveway, and fat tree branches spread over the sides to shade them in. There’s a large metal door directly in the center, and I look between it and Delila.

“I’ve not been told of what really happens here.”

Delila nudges her head toward the stairwell. “You’re about to find out.”

I follow behind her as she leads us up the concrete stairs and to the front door. I remember the day I saw Keaton down here, staring up at me from below. After that day, he told me this place wasn’t for the show. It was the wheels that kept the show turning. Whatever the hell that meant. I was fairly used to being left out of all the cool shit with my brother and his friends.

“What do you think?” Delila asks, hanging her trench coat on the hook near the front door. If I were honest, it’s cold, but that was when I knew this wasn’t a house as in a home. The foyer spreads wide, offering a direct view of the room in front of us that’s held up by even more glass windows that give a full view of the narrow valley of water between the stony cliff and where we stand. A single art piece hangs in the main room, directly above the fireplace. An abstract piece of beige, milk and honey which matches the brown leather sofas that sit tidily around the space.

“Well, it’s big?”

She laughs, taking my hand with hers and directing me deeper into the room. A long dark hallway to the left, and to the right there’s another room and kitchen. It’s now that I realize the whole place has glass windows for a view outside no matter where you are.

“Yes, it is.” Delila lowers herself onto one of the suede chairs and gestures to the one opposite her. Obviously, Mayhem hasn’t left yet since Delila is still here, which means Keaton is right over that cliff and through

the bushland. “Take a seat. Tonight is all about introductions.” She reaches for the lone cigarette on the marble table beside her, placing it between her lips and lighting the end. *Gag*. “As you probably know, Mayhem is on an international trip in three days, so that’s all I have with you until I fly back in six weeks. What you will be doing between the times that I’m gone, I will explain to you on day three, but there is one thing that is absolute, Cartier.” She leans forward, resting her hand on her thin knee. “You must continue to keep up appearances during the entirety of the process, until you’re ready.” Delila has always been a hard ass with everyone, but I’ve never seen the brutality that she shows other people. I never thought much about that until right now.

“Yes, I understand,” I whisper, blinking when my eyes dry out.

“The Brothers will not know. No one will know, Cartier. Do you understand?”

I watch as she pulls out a long knife from the holster strapped around her thigh. *Blood oath*. My first Kiznitch blood oath. Fun times. “Until the transition, at least.”

“Transition to...” This is Midnight Mayhem, yes, but it’s feeling more like Kiznitch, and that terrifies me. Midnight Mayhem is filled with people who’ve to perform and would never do anything to jeopardize that. Kiznitch, although beautiful, is still filtered with desperation.

She smiles widely, showcasing the small indents of lines on her smooth skin. “Well, that will be all in good time.”

“Are there going to be tests?” I ask, shifting farther up my seat.

“No. That’s more Patience’s thing, not ours. The idea is to have you trained, prepped, and ready in three years. It could take longer or shorter, that will depend on you.”

“For what?” I try again, even though I know she’s feeding me answers that only leave me hungry for more.

Her blue eyes brighten. “*Everything*. Everything, Cartier. We will show you everything.” She stands from her chair and stubs her smoke out in the ashtray. “Come. I’ll show you around.”

I follow her command as she directs us down a dimly lit hallway. “Everything here is officially yours to do with as you please.” Two young men walk down the stairs as we pass, holding metal trays and dressed in ripped jeans and—well, nothing else. “And I really do mean... as you please. The people included.” She waves her hands, and the boys continue

down the stairs with a smile. This is no surprise to me. Our lineage is fucked, and a lot of the women use men as toys. Can't say I object much, since I've seen how The Brothers and Fathers treat women. I mean, The Brothers at least simmer down once they're with their people, but The Fathers are a different story. There's no such thing as monogamy in Kiznitch, and it has been that way for some time. Until, well, until I'm hoping our generation.

Delila continues to gesture toward each door. "Your office will be at the end of this hallway, but these doors here will lead you to your bedroom... and other things."

I pause my steps. "Other things?"

When she notices I'm no longer following her, she turns to face me, tilting her head to the side, causing the sharp ends of her bob to graze against her shallow shoulder bone. "You know that there have always been The Four Fathers who ran things..." She slowly takes another step. "...and that was to be passed down to The Brothers when the time comes."

"Yes..." Everyone knew what she was saying. "And?"

She raises a perfectly plucked brow. "Cartier, honey..."

"What?" I look to the side, then back at her.

"Things are changing. *You* will be coached, guided, trained, and primed to do what all four of them have had to do."

I pale, cocking my head back. *No fucking way.* "No!" I gasp, shaking my head. "No way! I thought I was going to... I don't know what."

Delila's face remains frozen. "It's not that bad once you get used to it all."

"Delila, I don't think I should be the one who does all of that, and on top of *literally* all of that, I don't know how I'm supposed to cover *one* Father, let alone do all of the things that all four of them have done, which by the way, what the fuck did they do?" I suck in a deep breath.

Delila chuckles lightly, singing while hooking her arm in mine. "Oh, honey. That's why we have three years, and don't worry... by the time we've finished with you, you'll be more than ready." Panic grips around my throat when I struggle to find my next words. She presses the wooden doors with her hands, and they sprawl open to a large room with windows for walls and a simple modern white desk in the middle, facing the entrance.

"This will be your office. Use it as you please. There are new bank details that need your signature on the desk. I know you've got access to

your Nero trust account, but these accounts are yours for the work you do. It will get vastly bigger the longer you're here. By the time you're taking over in three years, you'll be the first woman with a billion dollars behind her own name that doesn't come from the family trust." She leans on the desk, crossing her ankles. "Make no mistake, you will work for it. This job is not going to be easy. It's going to be hard, challenging, and honestly—" She tilts her head to the side, her lips spreading flat. "A little questionable."

"No." I shake my head. She stops talking, and I bring my eyes to hers. "Don't make it easy on me just because I'm young, or a woman." I start walking around the room, finding myself near the inbuilt wooden fireplace that's free-standing offset to the desk. Tracing the curves of the patterns in the plaster, I turn back to face her. "Train me in everything that The Brothers do."

She smirks widely. "That's our girl." She gestures to the papers. "Sign all the boring shit, and when you're ready to decorate, do so. I've left the interior designer details on your desk too. Use him. He's great." Delila kicks off the desk. "Today is an introduction. Tomorrow is when we will go through the first door." My eyes find the doors down the hallway, when I realize there are three. One for each Father or Brother, I gather. With the office being the fourth. *Shit.*

"Yes, sweet one." She slaps my cheek lightly, the wrinkles on the side of her eyes deepening. "You will need to be trained with each one." I watch as she disappears down the hallway and find myself sitting on the plush chair, squeezing the leather arms. I don't even know what each Brother does. Killian, the trickster and master manipulator. King, the boss—which I'm guessing is this office here. Keaton... *death*. Kyrin... more death, just the nerdy version—oh combat! In hindsight, it makes sense that I get this job, since all of them raised me. On top of that, I have to recruit. I think they misinterpreted my nickname the Ice Queen because even I don't think I'll be able to grow hard enough for that.

Fuck.

I have no one to talk to about this. Not even Nial—especially not Nial—everything has just taken a turn for the worse. Now I don't *want* to tell anyone.

I pick up the pen that's on my desk and start signing the papers Delila laid out without even looking. My mouth is dry and my stomach is

grumbling by the time I sign the very last paper, collecting them and laying the stack tidily on the edge of the desk.

The blank computer screen stares back at me and I lean back in my chair, wondering if I'm allowed to turn it on.

I mean, surely...

A black screen lights up with a white space blinking. Weird. Okay.

I type out the first words that come to my head. **What if I can't hurt people?**

Digging out my phone from my back pocket, I pause when movement on the screen catches my eyes. **Welcome to The Castle, Ice Queen. How can we help you today?**

I pause. My fingers glide over the keyboard just as there's a distant knock on my office door.

"Cartier, would you like any refreshments?"

I lean to the side to see one of the men from earlier carrying a tray of deli meats, aged cheese, and crisp bread. "Yes. Please."

He bows, moving farther into the room and placing the tray onto my desk. He has to be my age... "How old are you?" I ask while studying his features closely to gauge my guess. Warm brown eyes, blond hair, and smooth skin. Definitely my age.

"Seventeen." He flashes me a wide smile. One that I'm sure would work on other girls, but not so much on this one.

"And you're a recruit?"

"Correct." He stands straight with his tight muscles on display. "Jordan and I are here to service you throughout your trials. If at the end you decide to let us go, we will go back to Kiznitch."

"Hmmm, okay."

"Was there anything else that you needed?"

I shake my head slowly. "Nope. Thanks..."

"Chris." He turns and walks out the same way he came with long, wide steps. I wonder if King would've got a Jordan and a Chris.

I sure as fuck know Killian would have.

Shutting the front door of my apartment in the city, I drop my jacket onto the counter and move through to the lounge, flicking on the light.

I jump when I see Eli—I think his name is—sitting on the very same sofa I saw him on before. "Look, no offense or anything, and last time was

great—and you’re hot—but I’m not in the mood right now.”

I fall onto the sofa opposite him, turning my head to the side and covering my eyes with my arm. My muscles ache and I didn’t even use them today. I’m so doomed this week. “Tell me a story.”

“You’re not what I expected. Should I start there?” he answers, and his tone makes me stiffen. He’s playful—good. I like playful because it’s unfamiliar.

“Hmmm.” I sigh. “And what did you expect?” I know in the back of my mind I should be asking who the fuck he is, what the fuck he wants, and how the fuck he continues to get into my apartment, but my feet throb, my eyes are being weighed down by lead, and I’m pretty sure that I’m a second away from closing my eyes for good.

Sleep.

Sweet sleep. It has nothing to do with work, since all I did today was paperwork and figured out how to use my computer—after getting rid of the creepy *Red Queen* on it, and more to do with the fact that the dark sky is about to ignite with a blazing nectar for a new day.

“Well, when your brother called me to babysit his little sister,” he pauses, and I crack a stubborn eye open, shifting my arm slightly up to see him. He’s a blur from my eyes being closed, but it’s all I need. “I thought you actually needed a sitter.”

“I let you fuck me last night, Eli. I’m pretty sure that’s evidence enough that Kyrin is right on hiring a sitter.”

“Oh, I ain’t hired...” He switches legs, resting a glass filled with amber liquid on his calf. “...and true. Fucking people who show up in your room something you do often?”

“Only ones dumb enough to try, and smart enough to get through,” I mumble beneath my breath, covering my eyes with my arm again. “So if you’re sent from my brother, that means I’m safe with you—but by the way, we’re not fucking again.”

“Deal—but you have to keep yourself out of trouble.”

“Well, I’m almost certain that’s going to be really hard, Eli Rebellious.” I yawn loudly, blacking out every second before coming back to awareness.

“And why’s that, *Ice Queen*.”

“Because apparently, I fuck my kidnappers.”



Five

Cartier

I wake with aching legs from yesterday. Bedroom. My lamp shade, oval floor mirror, TV... closed shutters. Who the hell put me to bed?

“You’re awake?” the familiar voice says from my doorway, and I turn to the side to face him. He’s cradling a bowl in his hand and spooning granola into his mouth.

“Yes, unfortunately.” I squint my eyes. “What’s the time?”

“Two o’clock. Came home from school early to make sure your heart didn’t stop. You didn’t fucking move when I carried you to bed last night.” He stops when he’s directly beside my bed. As he lowers himself down onto the mattress, I get a whiff of his cologne. Vanilla brewed with spice. Somehow, it’s too strong. Too much. This boy loves to show off his big dick—which another, unfortunately, I know he has.

“You’re getting very comfortable in my house, Rebs.” My eyes close again. Ahhh rest. Sleep.

Cold metal touches my lips and I screech. “Open.”

I look down and see a spoon filled with Lucky Charms, not granola.

“You need to eat, Cartier. If you fade away, I’m pretty sure your brother will blame me for that too...”

I open my mouth wide, because *Lucky Charms*. The milky cereal sits on my tongue and I chew slowly as milk slips down my throat.

I swallow. "Are you moving in or something?"

His hazel eyes flicker. *Mischief*. Maybe. "I can."

"Please don't. I need my space. But—" I push up from the mattress and take the next spoonful he feeds me as if he's been doing this all of my life. "I'm happy for you to break in any time to feed me cereal and carry me to bed."

He chuckles, scratching his abs and watching as I move around my room, attempting to find my—ah! Phone. "I have a key, but sure thing, Skippy. I'll make sure you're carried to bed and fed." He pauses, his tongue gliding over his teeth. "Not fucked, though, because I'm pretty sure I actually like you and I don't fuck people I like."

I pause, tossing the clothes I'm about to change into over my arm. "A compliment?"

Eli stifles a laugh. "Hmm. Appears so."

"So," I say, turning the faucet of my shower on and stripping naked. "What school do you go to?" I put my hand beneath the spray of hot water before stepping beneath, squeezing soap into the palm of my hand.

"A private school in The Hamptons."

"Hmmm," I say, peeking over my shoulder when I hear his voice louder in the bathroom. The nudity doesn't bother me, and I don't know if that's my Kiznitch talking or because he's already seen everything. "Riverside Prep?"

His eyes slant. "How'd you know?"

"I have a friend that goes there, and I'm guessing there aren't a lot of private schools there, so figured it would be the same." Steam rolls up my nose with a roll of cotton candy and freshly sliced peaches.

"Are you going to get into any trouble today?" I would otherwise be insulted that he isn't checking me out, but somewhere between us fucking last night and this morning, we've both slipped into a platonic friendship that sits comfortably on the balance.

"Nope." I reach for my towel and wrap it around my body, turning off the shower. "I'm too busy. I have to go do..." I pause. Maybe this is what Delila meant by how I have to keep up appearances to the outer world. "My new job."

Eli flashes me a wicked grin, one that would otherwise make my knees weak last night. “Ah, Midnight Mayhem and all your fucked-up shit.”

Now it’s my turn for my eyes to narrow. “How did you know about Mayhem?”

“I know everything there is to know about you all, Cartier. Now...” He pauses to look down at the gold Rolex around his wrist. “I’ll drop you off to your friend before I’ve got to leave. I’ll be home later.”

“So you are moving in?” I ask with a high brow while squeezing toothpaste onto my toothbrush.

He winks at me while turning to leave. “Yup! Be ready in twenty.” In twenty minutes, I have to have my makeup done and be dressed for the day. I still don’t know what it’s going to entail today, and part of me doesn’t really want to think too much into it. I’m seventeen, but I think I always knew at the back of my mind that I would never have the privilege of an average teen life. Not that I’m complaining. Average bores me. I need to drown in excitement and live for the thrill, or what is the purpose of living at all?

I slap on a basic makeup look, dress in double time, and manage to take a quick selfie for the Gram. My followers grow every day, but I’ve found that the more I post of me riding, the more engagement I get. I have to repost old photos because I’ve found no space to ride since I haven’t been to The Village in weeks.

Jogging down the stairs, I pull my hair out from beneath my scarf and grab an apple from the fruit basket. “I’m ready.”

Eli holds the door open, looking me up and down. “Does your brother know you’re not a virgin?”

“Have you met my brother?” I waltz past him, patting him on the chest. “But yes, he knows. He just doesn’t know who punched my card.”

“Oh.” Eli shuts the door behind him, tapping his sunglasses over his eyes. “Story time for our trip?” I punch the code to get us down to the residents’ parking lot.

“Hmm.” I lean against the wall. “Maybe once I know I can trust you, Playboy.” Truth is a lot worse because I think I do trust him, which is insane because I barely know him and he’s not part of our world. He’s some rich preppy kid that attends a private high school probably filled with snotty jocks, and he—“A Ferrari?” I look between him and the sleek black vehicle

sitting in the private parking. The elevator doors close behind us, and just as I step forward, he tosses me the keys.

“You can drive.”

I smirk, rolling my lips beneath my teeth. I’ve never driven on the roads before, mainly because the opportunity has never arisen. Twirling them around my index finger, I press the alarm button and the doors open.

“I’m excited. We *have* to pick up Nial.”

“...and who is Nial?”

“The person I mentioned who went to your school—that’s Nial.”

Eli’s fingers click together as we both slide into our seats. “That motherfucker is the smartest kid at Riverside Prep.”

“Really?” I’m not surprised. Nial *is* the smartest person I know personally, but it feels good to hear someone else talk about my closest friend that way.

“Yeah, really.”

I push the button to start the engine and sigh when it rumbles against my butt.

“SpaceX wants to recruit him for some NASA project they have going on. He’d be the youngest to have ever been given the opportunity.”

“He does want to be an astronaut.” I pull out of park, swinging our ass end out and then tapping the gear into drive.

“You’ve driven before...” He smiles broadly.

I hit the music on. “Of course. Do you not follow me on Instagram?”

“Well, no...” he answers honestly as I drive up the ramp and press my finger to the little fingerprint machine to let us out.

“Change that—” I bat my lashes at him before putting it into first gear, shooting us forward and onto the road.

“So—” He stops talking, his smirk evaporating when his eyes land in the side mirror.

“What is it?” I ask, my skin prickling with unease. I may not have known Eli for very long, but even I can see something has set him off.

“Keep driving.” He points to the road, shuffling farther up his seat.

“Well, I wasn’t going to stop...” I tease, looking between him and the road ahead. “What’s wrong?”

His mouth flatlines. “Nothing. Just keep driving until I say so.”

“To where?” I try not to look at him too long before going back to the road, swerving us onto the highway on-ramp and flooring it until the

speedometer leans over toward one-twenty. “Is someone following us? Because I don’t want to take them directly to Nial.”

Eli stares at the side mirror, bringing his fist to his mouth. “Fuck. Take the third exit.”

“What?” I screech, flexing my fingers around the wheel. “No, I only get a few hours a day to myself before I have to work—”

“—Cartier, baby, *take that exit.*”

“Okay!” I swerve between cars and do what he says, passing the exit that I needed for Nial. I should have stayed in bed longer.

“They’re gone...” he murmurs, more to himself than me.

I peer into the rearview mirror. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” Eli says, but his fist tenses on top of his thigh. His phone starts ringing and the name Dominic Stranger flashes across his screen. He groans, swiping it unlocked as I take the next off-ramp to turn around.

“What?” he snaps down the phone. Cold enough for me to notice his change of tone. He sits up straighter, and I try not to pay too close attention to him. I don’t want him to think I’m prying. *When I am.* “No. I’ll call you later.”

Eli hangs up and runs his fingers through his hair. “Can you hang at Nial’s? We’re not being followed, and I need to go for a few hours.”

I’ve only known Eli a couple of days, but it almost feels as though I’ve known him longer. Like we may have been best friends in a past life. His mouth is in a flat line, his hair an array of curls on his head, and if it wasn’t for his flawless skin, I’d say he had a few lines around the corners of his eyes. He’s stressed, and if I’m not wrong, it takes a lot to do that.

“Yeah, sure,” I say gently, not wanting to add to whatever situation he has going on. “Can I ask you something, though?” Okay, maybe just a little...

He rolls his eyes, kicking out his leg while looking out the window briefly. “You’re going to anyway.”

I pegged Eli to be something the first night I met him. I recognized an air of danger that stuck to him the same way it did The Brothers, but I’ve still got to know... “Why did my brother put you on me? You must be someone for him to trust you enough to watch me?”

“That’s something I still don’t know.” He sighs, and I take a few turns through the busy city streets. We come to a traffic light stop and I take this moment to stare at him, hoping to find a lie.

“But you must be *someone*...”

“Oh, I am...” His upper lip curls into a sly smile, but then it’s gone. “And your brother knows that, which is probably how I came about this babysitting gig.”

“Soooo... what are you?” I pull into the parking lot outside the café that Nial’s parents own. Well, they own this one, another one up East, and about another twenty more all over the world. They made their bakery houses into a multi-billion-dollar franchise before they were twenty-five. They’re humble, though, not like my rank ass parents.

Our doors open and I step out onto the street, wiggling my brows at Eli. “You some big mafia boss?”

“May as well be,” Nial answers for Eli, nudging his head in that jerk motion boys do. I watch as they both pull each other in to do that awkward hug thing. “Thanks for bringing her back to me in one piece.”

“You know I would.” Eli smirks at Nial, laying a kiss on my temple as he rounds the car. He points to the both of us. “I’ll be back to take her to work. Feel free to tell her all about me.”

“Was going to anyway!” Nial calls out as Eli pulls away from the curb. His arm hooks in mine and he pulls me down the street. “I need alcohol for this. I know where we can sneak in.”

“Nial.” I laugh, squeezing his arm with mine.

The atmosphere feels sedated, like a drug binge on LSD. Tea lights dip low off the ceiling, and there’s a woman playing a guitar on the center stage. Her lyrics drift through the air as I stand paralyzed, watching as her fingers flick through the strings of the guitar. Her eyes meet mine. Then again. And again.

“So you met an Elite King...” Nial waves over a waiter and orders four shots. I don’t bother telling him I won’t be drinking because *a what?*

“A what?” The woman’s guitar keeps playing and I find my eyes getting heavier. I am sure I got enough sleep last night, or maybe it was the little car chase I almost got into that’s catching up with me.

“Eli Rebellis is part of a cult slash secret society, kind of like your Kiznitch but somehow worse—and trust me—that pains me to say because y’all are fucking bad.” Cult? Whatever I expected him to say, this wasn’t it.

The shots are lined up on our table and the waitress flips her hair behind her shoulders, caressing Nial’s arm. “There you go, honey. You tell me if

you need anything else.”

“The Elite Kings are run by ten families. They all have weird little things that they do, and you know what? This would take me all day to scratch the surface. All you need to know is that they’re dangerous and powerful. What are you doing with Eli?”

I circle the edge of the shot glass with my finger. “I—um. Kyrin stuck him on me for babysitting since I got in some trouble lately.”

“Ahhh...” Nial takes the glass that my finger was happily playing with, throwing it back before slamming the glass onto the table. “Makes sense. To protect a monster, one must be a monster.”

I shuffle to the side, readjusting my position. “What did you say this place was?”

Nial hitches his thumb over his shoulder. “I don’t know. I stumbled in here last week and they didn’t card me, so figure, why not try it again, and sure enough—it worked again.”

I look around the place, noting the dim lighting and the soft music that’s playing through the space. The woman on the stage playing a remake of “Tennessee Whiskey” raises her head, her eyes coming to mine. I have never seen her in my life, yet she studies me like she has been waiting for me to walk through the doors.

My phone vibrating in my pocket distracts me, and I grab it out to see Keaton’s name flashing over the screen.

My stomach flips as though I’ve just been caught doing something I shouldn’t have been doing. I squash it down with an iron fist before swiping the green arrow to answer.

“Yes?”

Silence. “Where are you?” Keaton and I have danced to the same tune since we were probably too young to recognize the feelings we were both experiencing. This isn’t anything new, but what is new—thanks to the two things I call legs that opened faster than I could tell myself no—is the heat that seems to pool between my thighs any time I think of our night together. Or that anxiety that coils around my belly like live wire whenever he’s around. These are all new. Keaton is hot, sure—they all are. Except my brother, of course. Gross. But Keaton has always been different. He never hid his demons, he trained them to stand at his side so people knew exactly who they were dealing with when they met the deep depths of his hazel eyes.

“I’m at a bar with Nial. Where are *you*...?” I feel my cheeks tighten as a smile spreads over my face. When my eyes collide with Nial, my smile falls. *Shit*. “No, but seriously...”

“In the air somewhere between the US and Turkey.” Jealousy digs its ugly claws into my chest when I hear everyone laughing in the background. No doubt they took the 747 and are all having *the time* of their lives up there while I’m down here, drinking in a shady bar.

I cross my leg over the other, pointedly ignoring Nial. Thankfully, it isn’t loud, and the woman who was on the stage earlier has left. “What’s with the phone call?”

“Wondering how you’re coping with your newfound freedom, since Ky decided to leave your leash loose. Didn’t expect a bar. You’re fucking seventeen.”

“Hmmm, the same way I didn’t expect you to be who you are either...”

Silence again.

“Cartier...” His tone is low, just enough for me to hear a distinct growl at the end of the R. “Get outside somewhere quiet so I can actually talk to you and do it now.”

“Or what?” I play, noticing the woman re-entering the stage, only now with a different dress on. Her hair is pulled back into a tight bun, her eyes now rimmed with dark hollows. She has tried to hide it with concealer, but it hasn’t held well. “You’re all the way up in the air.” I lower my voice but stand quietly from the table, holding up two fingers to Nial to gesture *two minutes*. “What could you possibly do to me, hmm?”

As soon as the outside air slaps me across the face, I feel alone with him. Leaning against the concrete wall, I breathe out a sigh of relief from being out of the confinement of the bar.

His laughter rolls right down the crack of my spine. “You really think I can’t have you naked, spread eagle, and finger fucking yourself to the sound of my voice if I don’t want you to?” His words settle between my thighs and they clench together to stop from reaching further. I can hear someone in the background. “Tigger, do you really think I can’t have you naked, wet, and waiting for me when I land? Whether that be tomorrow, two weeks...”

My throat dries and my eyes slam closed. I’m going to need to talk myself down if I want my heart to stop thrashing against my ribcage like a cellmate on death row.

“What are you wearing?” he adds barely above a whisper.

“I—a leather skirt and puffer jacket.” My tongue slides over my bottom lip as I look down the street. People are walking by without a clue. One woman is walking her lap dog while yelling at someone down her phone. Another is looking down at the ground with sad eyes, unable to hold eye contact with anyone.

“Good. Put your hand on your pussy...”

“Keaton—”

“Did I stutter?”

“I’m on Eat Street. At lunch time. It’s busy.”

“Did I ask for those details?”

“No...” I answer, my hand finding its way up my inner thigh. Could it be possible for New Yorkers to be so self-absorbed that they won’t notice what I’m doing? Possible.

“Do as I say. Close your eyes, imagine I’m right in front of you...” My eyes close and I’m wrapped in darkness, with nothing but my beating heart and his voice.

“Okay...”

“How wet are you?”

His voice alone lights my body up like the Fourth, and a slight moan slips from between my lips when my thumb brushes against my clit. “Really wet...”

“Good.” His sensual tone evaporates. “Remember this next time you think I can’t control you just because I’m forty thousand feet in the air.” My eyes pop open like someone had just dumped ice water over my head.

My feet land to the floor in a thud just as familiar laughter barks out through the phone. My mouth hangs open in horror when I realize what Keaton just did.

Kyrin hollers again loudly in the background. “Fuck. Tigger goes off, huh?”

My cheeks ignite into flames as Keaton responds to my brother, but his words are directed at me. “Yeah, she knows who owns her, and if she didn’t...” He pauses, and I can imagine the smug smirk on his stupid face. “...She sure as fuck does now.”

I hang up on him with an exasperated scream, cutting off Kyrin’s loud cackle. *We’ll see who’s laughing when you find out who Tigger is, Brother...*

I push my phone into my pocket. Revenge is going to look so sexy smeared over Keaton’s face.

“There you are,” Nial slurs. He misses a step and falls into me.

I chuckle, hooking my arm around his. “Let’s get you back to my house to sober up. I’ll take you home after work.”

Just as I’m waving down a taxi, the loud revving of a European car steals my attention and I spin around to see Eli and another guy jumping out of Eli’s car and coming straight for me.

Eli’s void of his signature smug smile, so instantly I know something is wrong.

“Get in the car.”

“Nial is drunk—”

“Did you not fucking hear? Get in the car!” the other one yells. He has dark hair and angry eyes. His skin is pale, his cheekbones about as sharp as his tone.

“Um, yeah, I fucking did, but as I said—”

“Cartier, this isn’t the time. Get in the car...” Eli flips the seat forward and rolls his wrists. “Both of you!”

“I don’t think I’m drunk enough to be standing opposite Brantley Vitiosis...” Nial swallows a burp.

I shove him into the back seat, shooting one last glare at *Brantley Vitiosis* over my shoulder.

I pause. “Wait, do you own the hotel?”

Brantley ignores me, and it’s not until Eli’s in the car that my question is answered.

“Yes, he does—among other things...” Nial rests his head on the little window. The back seats are squashed, but there’s a center console that makes it less confined.

“Eli, what’s going on?” Money doesn’t impress me, and neither does status. Clearly, Brantley has both. As does Eli.

“You were being followed earlier. I’ve been trying to figure it out who it could have been, even involving your brother.” Eli switches gears and I fly into the back of the seat. “But I couldn’t find anyone who would be dumb enough to follow my car knowing who I am. Turns out, you are someone people want.” I try to ignore his vague answer, even though it opened one hundred more of my own.

“What do you mean?”

Little snores leave Nial, his mouth hanging open and his eyes closed. I’d laugh if I wasn’t already stressed about what Eli is talking about.

“The car that followed us wants something. I don’t know what yet, but I’m going to find out, and until then, you need to be with me, and before you fight it, your brother agrees.” He squeezes the steering wheel, tapping his finger against the gear to drop it down. “I’ll drop you to work and then pick you up. Can’t trust fucking anyone right now.”

“Ah... you’re forgetting one thing—” I add, fighting the urge to be offended by their lack of faith in my intelligence. “I was in your car, so how is it something to do with Midnight Mayhem?”

“Because no one would come for us...” Brantley’s tone is flat. Like his personality.

“And why is that?” I challenge, but make sure to watch both their reactions.

“Because they’re The Elite fucking Kings,” Nial slurs, resting his head against the rest. “And no one fucks with The Kings.”

Eli drops me back off at The Castle and I slowly make my way through the front door, shutting it behind me when I find it so quiet.

“Cartier!” Kaius rounds the corner of where the family room is, holding a knife in one hand and a gun in the other. “Shall we start?”



“What the fuck made this so important?” Eli asks, slamming the front door to the penthouse closed while grabbing the gun out of his inside jacket.

Rolling my eyes, I unclasp my jacket and toss it onto the kitchen counter. “You can put that away, you know. This place is safe. No one can touch me here, and I need—”

A hand slams over my mouth, forcing my back against a hard chest. A gun cocks before Eli can. “No, no. No stupid business...” I don’t recognize the voice behind me. Not even a little.

He continues to move us backward, but my eyes stay locked on Eli.

He keeps his focus on me, but his words are for the intruder. “You know, I’m impressed. You’ve got balls to lay hands on the Kiznitch princess.”

“Hmmm, interesting you say that...” another voice says, and I try to shuffle out of the firm grip. His hand clenches tighter. Dammit. I really wish today wasn’t a combat day. My limbs ache from being overworked. I don’t think I can even throw a decent punch right now.

Eli’s eyes widen in shock before finally looking away from me and over my shoulder. “What the fuck do you want?”

“That’s the big question, isn’t it?” A Zippo opens and snaps closed. “I’ve come to collect what is mine.”

Confusion overrides my panic. The man behind me lowers us to a single sofa, spreading his legs until I fall between them. His fingers sprawl over my belly and I still.

Eli’s face morphs to something entirely different. A little straighter and a little less lopsided with his signature grin. “No...”

The hand that’s still covering my mouth tightens.

“Oh... yes...” I look between the two of them, confused with the conversation they’re having. Maybe I was right in thinking that the person who was following us had something to do with Eli. I mean, Nial did say they’re part of some secret society cult thing that is pretty much the same as the mob.

Eli leans back in his chair, his eyes now never moving from the man on the chair opposite. He’s older—I’d say mid-forties, with graying hair on the sides and a constant smirk I wish I could rub off my skin. “Who knows?”

The old man holds his stare as he slowly raises his cigar to his thin lips. “No one outside this room.”

“You can’t,” Eli responds instantly, so fast I *know* for sure that they’re having a weird conversation.

“And why is that?” the man asks, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his thigh. Maybe he wants Eli—why? I don’t know—but this has definitely got to do with him and not me, since it’s obvious Eli knows whomever he is.

Eli matches his stance, unbuttoning his suit jacket and leaning on his thighs. He lowers his voice when he answers. “Because you know who I am.”

The man seems to pause, as if he’s going to laugh. I mean, he’s going to laugh, right? Eli may have a shadow that hovers over him the same way it does The Brothers, but he’s still basically a child, and this man looks like he just climbed from the wilderness.

The man leans back in his chair. “Are you going to take it instead?”

Eli’s jaw clenches, and I reach up for the hand that’s covering my mouth, attempting to tear it away, but he only squeezes harder and he’s much stronger than me. *Shit*. I’m never wanting to be in this position again.

“Not yet—but yes.”

The man looks between Eli and me, his brows curved downward as if he’s trying to figure out what our situation is. I don’t even know what our situation is, so good luck to anyone else trying to figure it out.

“Done.” He stands, stubbing his cigar out on my carpet. *Motherfucker*. “I’ll be back when I’m ready.” Then he curls his finger and gestures toward the man who is holding me, and he finally releases his grip around my mouth, shoving me off him. They both saunter out of the kitchen and through the front door, slamming it on their way out.

“What the fuck was that about?” I look up at Eli from the floor, swiping the leftover dribble from my lip.

He smiles down at me, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Nothing you have to worry about just yet.”



Six

Three years later

Present

Cartier

The room is dark. There are LED lights that line the outskirts of the floor and tables, and smoke machines that spill fog out around your feet. Music plays gently in the background, but it does nothing to distract my thoughts.

They think I care enough to run.

That I'm doing the usual Cartier and running away from my problems, but they're wrong.

"Another?" The bartender holds up a bottle of Grey Goose. He's young. Around the age of Jordan when I first met him.

I slide my glass toward him with my index finger. "Thanks." He watches me carefully as he continues to pour in the vodka.

"I take it there's a reason why you're here?" His brow lifts, and on another night, I might've fucked him because he's pretty, but not tonight. Tonight I only have one thing on my mind, and that's answers. I've spent three years training and quietly building the reputation that I have.

"Isn't there always a reason why people are here?" I flick my leg over the other, leaning back in my chair. "And I gather there's a reason why it's

empty right now and I'm the only one in it."

"Smart..." He crosses his arms in front of himself and leans against the shelving. His eyes are smudged with dark liner—even darker than what Kohen does—and his hair is long but tied to the nape of his neck. I'd call him pretty, but I'm not sure if it's just the long hair that makes him look that way.

"Guess I have to be..." I place the now empty glass onto the counter, tracing the rim with my finger. "What I don't have to be, though, is patient, and I've got to be honest with you, Callum from Eastwood with two children and a wife..." I pause, rolling my eyes. "And let's not forget the sneaky link you have pregnant, I don't have a lot of patience." I watch as the color drains from his face at the mention of his entire life. "So." I clap my hands. "Tell your boss—and I mean your new boss—to bring his ass in here now so I can have that chat. You know..." I lean forward, parting my lips while keeping my eyes locked on his. "While I still have a smidge left."

His eyes slant, but he reaches for a phone that's sitting on the bar, tapping three numbers while keeping his gaze locked on me. "She knows." He hangs up and now my phone vibrates against my leg.

I reach into my pocket and take it out, seeing Lilith's name flash over the screen.

I open her message.

Can't talk right now. R U Ok?

She messages back. **Yes. I'm worried about you...**

The hardest part about my keeping everything a secret for three years and playing the bratty little sister that throws her weight around and has no substance, is how many times I have to say *I'm okay*. I was supposed to be if anything happened to Delila, but now The Fathers have asked me to keep it quiet a little longer. If it wasn't for my mother, I would feel completely alone through the first two years.

I'm fine. Don't tell them we spoke.

I push my phone back into my pocket. I need some more paparazzi photos of me with Alexandra, the third kissing outside a nightclub or something. It's been four days. My brother will start to grow suspicious if he doesn't see me dragging my drunk ass around Europe, laying every man with a title flat on his back. Every time a new photo drops, Keaton sends a selfie of him flipping me off. So there's that. Anything to piss off the man

who I haven't touched, fucked, or been near for three years. I just made it my job to stay away from him, since I knew any time we were near, it would be unDoveable. Not to mention he could sniff a lie on me like he could my perfume.

"Cartier Nero... what a pleasure."

A smile spreads over my lips as I turn the barstool slightly to face the owner of the voice. "Afternoon. I don't believe we've met in some time..." His graying hair is longer, and instead of it kept short on the sides, he's grown it long and ties it all back with a band. The skin around his eyes is withered, but the dark orbs that look back at me tell me stories that I don't think I could imagine.

"Three years, isn't it?" He smiles around his cigar, and I smile through the memories of him burning my carpet. The chair squeaks when his weight rests on it, curling his fingers at the bartender to serve him a drink.

"That's right. Three years since you broke into my home and had one of your"—I cast my eyes over his shoulder, to the same man he had with him all those years ago—"little puppies with his hands on me."

"Oh, trust me, Cartier, his hands would have been in a lot of other places had it not been for Eli." I pause, the corner of my lip curling up in disgust, before I swipe it away and regain my composure. *The first hint of a lie is the person's shoulders. They'll dip because you've pinched a nerve.*

"Your threats don't frighten me, Stranger. I know who you are and what you run here. I also know that you have my friend, so—"

"Let me guess..." Dominic Stranger snickers around the fat trunk of his cigar. "You want to save him? How about this..." He pauses long enough to roll the cigar between his fingers, and I watch as a shadow passes his eyes. "You can do him a favor. You are Kiznitch, after all."

"I won't be doing anyone anything until I have him back with me. He doesn't belong here with you, and I don't know what it is you think you're trying to do here, but you won't win." I lean forward, resting my palm against his chubby chest. "You will not win against Kiznitch and the EKC. So I'll leave you with a parting thought." I stand, swiping my hands down my pants. "I'll give you forty-eight hours to deliver Eli to the address that is being sent to your phone right now, and if he is not there? Let's use your imagination real quick." I wave my hand up in the air to accentuate an imaginary image. "A war in this town, people knowing your secrets, blood all over this beautiful suit." I lean down so my lips are near his ear, fighting

the bile that's rising in my throat from his sheer proximity. "And a war is something I'm willing to start for my family. Is it something you're willing to lose yours for?"

I snatch my Prada clutch from the bar, pointing at the bartender before moving my sunglasses down the bridge of my nose. "And the answer is yes, I would have fucked you." My heels clink across the dirty bar floor until I'm out on the open street, my city car waiting on the curb.

Jordan is already standing with the back door open, his Uzi strapped outside his suit and the wrinkle lines in the middle of his forehead deeper than they were this morning before I told him what I was doing.

"Cartier, please don't ever ask me to sit out again. I will say no. You could have gotten hurt and it's my job to protect you. I took an oath!"

I roll my eyes at his theatrics, slipping into the back seat. I wait for him to start driving away before I answer. "Men like Dominic have fragile masculinity. If I had walked in there with my guards, he would have only seen it as a weakness, Jordan. Weakness will get a woman killed faster than stupidity." I tear my hair out of the slick ponytail it is in, running my fingers through my scalp to break up the strands. Kicking off my heels, I reach for my Vans and slip my socks on before tying them to my feet. I switch into some jeans and undo the buttons to the little blouse, tossing it onto the chair and changing to my vintage Versace crop. I breathe out a sigh, picking up my phone and scrolling through Instagram. Among my million and whatever followers, I've started sharing to TikTok too, but only when it's riding or doing weird skits. I wish I could say that's all to keep appearances, but it isn't. It allows me to have fun with this side since I have none with my Mayhem side. It's ironic. The reason why I wanted to finally join Mayhem was to enjoy my childhood more, but all it has done is try to rob it.

My phone starts ringing in my hand and I see my mother's name flash over the screen.

"Hey, Mom..." I wondered if I would be mad at her about finding out who my real father is if I wasn't who I was today, but I don't think I would be. I'm still Kiznitch, more than any of them, and so I have a little Patience in me. I can't say I'm surprised. The darkness has always lingered inside of me, I've just subdued it by feeding it my fears.

"Hey, honey, how is work?"

"Well," I say, looking out the window at the passing trees and busy streets. It has been a good thing that I have my mom, and I'll always be

thankful for her on that day...

Past

Kiznitch isn't a playground. Everyone knows that, so I hated coming back here as a kid.

Fog drifts around my ankles, and it feels a lot like my ancestors are reaching for me from below. This air would leave frost residue over my bones, the trees never grow leaves, and I'm pretty sure no one has seen a sunny day in all history of Kiznitch being founded. The land is old, the buildings ancient, the history haunted.

I stop outside the concrete gates of the driveway. I know I need to go down and stare up at the high pointed ceilings. I know this will be my home—this is going to be where I'll stay now, unless I need to be in the US during Midnight Mayhem. I have to lay low, and to do that I need to keep my distance.

Jordan and Chris are in the front of the car, handing the security at the gate our ID before Jordan drives us forward. I watch down below as the thick fog separates the further we drive until we finally stop outside a large wooden door that has iron latches and fittings.

I have no friends in this work. No one knows who I am or what I train to be. For two years I've kept up appearances, but it has gotten harder, especially since Delila's death. The stress of the business weighs down even further now that I am left to do everything without her, so I am looking forward to making Kiznitch my home. A place I can come to and be whomever I need to be.

Jordan shuts the car door after I grab my handbag, and I glare up at the ancient brickwork of Mayhem Castle.

"You know... I never thought I'd come back here, much less agree to live in it." Unfortunately, as much as I'm learning to run the business behind the scenes, I still do answer to The Four Fathers, and what they want right now makes a lot of sense. I still don't know why they're so adamant to keep me hidden, even from The Brothers, but I'm guessing they have their reasons.

"All of your furniture has already been moved. You have a cook, cleaner, groundsman, and a security team, though you won't need one so

large here since you are in Kiznitch.” I hook my arm with Jordan’s as he leads me up the steps, stopping once we reach the door. It looks as intimidating as it did when I first came here as a small child. “There are twelve bedrooms, a tennis court, a gym, theater, sauna, thirteen bathrooms, a wine cellar, and, well, downstairs...” I tuck my blue hair behind my ear, squinting my eyes up at the cobblestone architecture and stained glass shaped in the Kiznitch triangle above the door.

“Right,” I whisper. “Downstairs.” I’ve hardened myself a lot over the past two years. Mainly by circumstances. At times, I remind myself how old I am. What other eighteen-year-olds deal with all that I do?

None.

“Ahhh! You’re here!” My mother waltzes out the front door like a fairy. “Come, I will show you around and then we have just hours to prepare for the next recruit.”

“What? So soon?” I ask, staring between her and the door. “Why so soon?” It opens out to a flat open plan living area, with other rooms that lead off. A grand twin staircase is directly in front of me with blood-red carpet leading to a meeting point, before they carry on to the second level. It is all exhausted wood and withered windows, but then again—this is ground zero of Midnight Mayhem. It has a story, rich history. One I’ve dipped my toes into exploring.

My mother points to a wall. “Behind that is the kitchen. Obviously, we renovated, and to the left is the formal lounge room.” Antique sofas face each other, with a dark coffee table in-between. There is a large fireplace behind the sofa, and oil paintings hanging all over the walls. Persian rugs cover the floorboards, and every time we move, they silently squeak.

Mom continues to show me around the lower level, pointing out my office space, the theater, gym, and indoor pool, before we go upstairs to see the bedrooms. I stop after the master because I’m tired.

“Mom.” I squeeze her hand, directing her to the chaise that’s in front of my four-post bed. The room is surprisingly modern, with soft gray painted on the walls and white trimmings. It looks clean, yet sophisticated. The furniture is all mine, so none of that surprises me. “Why are we recruiting so quickly? I’ve just finished two years; I haven’t started that process yet.”

The lines around her eyes soften when her smile falls. “I know, dear, but it has to be done. You got past the first two, the last one is easy.”

Easy. Nothing about this has been easy.

I touch the black silk cover, smiling up at her. “I like this place, I think. More than that concrete jungle you all had me in.”

Her hand rests on mine. “Honey, I’m sorry that you have had to take this. Sometimes I wish it could be easy like it was for your brother, or any of the other girls—you danced, or rode, or did anything else, but what you’re having to do especially at such a young age...” She pauses for a second and I think maybe she’s finished. “But you are here for a reason. You are chosen, Cartier.” Her other hand comes to the side of my cheek. “There’s no one better for this role.”

“I know,” I answer confidently because I do. I know I’m good at what I do and that they chose me for their own reasons. “But I hate lying to Kyrin. He knows, Mom. Or he’s going to when he sees me.”

“He will survive when he finds out, but it will be on your terms, not because he figured it out.” She stands from the bed and I instantly miss her touch. “Your brother is in no position to judge you for keeping secrets. None of them are. Now...” She buries herself in my closet, her petite body disappearing into the darkness. “What can you wear tonight?”

“It’s a thing, isn’t it... the recruit...”

“Yes,” she echoes.

I close the distance and lean on the opening. “Is it just The Fathers who will be in attendance?”

“No, and The Brothers and Mayhem.”

I pause, squeezing my phone in my hand. Great. That means I’m going to have to be careful with how I conduct myself. “Mom, why...”

“Honey, you know how it is. We’re all in this together at the end of the day, even though you all have different jobs to do.” She passes me a hanger. “Wear this. I’ll have makeup and hair organized for you. It’s imperative that you are always the most beautiful in the room. Not that that’s hard.”

I push off the threshold, holding the dress up in front of me. “Not if Kill is in the room.”

She ignores me, bringing both hands to my cheeks and looking between my eyes. My mother isn’t a saint. She’s barely a mother, but she’s all I’ve had. “They’re going to suspect something tonight, with how you’re dressed, and how people will respond to you. You aren’t to answer them honestly, Cartier.” Over the two years that I’ve been doing this, I’ve not asked why I couldn’t tell them. The Fathers operate on a need-to-know basis, so if I need

to know, they'll tell me, but over time... I've started to question some things. Not all, just some. Like now.

"Why is it so important for them to not know? I don't understand. They're The Brothers. They're usually the ones ten steps ahead."

Her mouth curls slightly with a smile. "Not this time. This is different. You just have to trust The Fathers." That's the thing... I'm not sure I do.

"Sure, Mom. I can do that." Her hands fall to her side. She is doing the fake smile thing.

"I knew you could. I'll see you in five hours." The door closes behind her and I turn back to the dress that is laid out on my bed. Picking up my phone, I snap a shot of the mesh material with diamantes sewn in all the places that they need to be hiding areas and then flip the phone to selfie. Most of my content is usually riding, exploring on my days off, and vague food posts, since I love to cook. I hardly ever post selfies, mainly because I think there are more interesting things that I see every day that I'm sure people would rather look at, but right now, I feel like posting one. A smarter girl would wait for her makeup and hair, but I'm not that smart, and the dolled-up thing isn't my true authentic self.

I run my fingers through my hair, ruffling it up and moving it to one side. Grabbing one of the posters on my bed from above my head, I lean into it, staring right at the camera lens with my resting face. I turn it around and look at it. You can see my belly that's only slightly covered by my tied crop and the Chucks on my feet. My hair is long, hanging to just above my hips, right above the little Kiznitch star on my hip. It doesn't look the same as The Brothers' ones; mine has delicate lines and Mandela art surrounding it. I'm not as covered in tattoos as Keaton, but I am more than my brother. I have little pieces here and there that I wanted at the time, and I add to my canvas whenever I get the urge. We have our own artist in Mayhem who has done all my work, so it has been easily accessible. The hardest part about it has been using him without seeing The Brothers.

Back to the picture. I think I look good. My cheeks are flushed, just enough to show the small sprinkle of freckles, and my lips are soft and puffy, as if I'd just pumped them with a fresh milligram of Juvéderm. My upper lip flips over slightly, giving off the appearance of them being bigger than what they are. My eyes look brighter today, a vibrant ocean blue, and my hair... well. My hair needs to be topped up since the teal blue is fading out to a pastel. I kind of like it, though.

I tap both images and type out the caption *new dress, new bitch*.

And hit Post. I've currently got a million and something followers but gained a lot over the past couple years since I've kept everything on here very on brand for The Brothers. Traveling, cooking, other going out shit that Nial and I do. The one person who stays off my Instagram is—my phone starts ringing in my hand.

I smile, swiping it to answer. "Eli..."

"That selfie is hot as fuck. Gonna get you in trouble with either your psycho plaything or your psycho brother." Car horns are beeping in the background, and Eli cusses at someone under his breath.

"How's New York?"

"Missing you. Wish I could be there..."

"Why?" I raise a brow, flicking off the button to my jeans. "So you can continue to keep tabs on me?"

Eli barks out a laugh, a door closing in the background, cutting out the noise. "That's a fair statement."

"Mmmhmm..." I turn on the shower and toss my clothes into the corner. The bathroom is basic, yet still somehow cozy. Not at all like the glass museum at the Nero mansion in The Village or the penthouse. "Have you just called to torture me, or is there seriously something wrong?"

He huffs out a breath, and I can imagine him running his fingers through his hair and the stress line between his eyes. Eli is a pretty boy through and through, so when he's upset, mad, or stressed—he looks cute. He hates that I bring this up any time he's one of those things too. "Yeah, I've got some news."

"Are you going to tell me what that night was about?" I ask him every day about the men in my lounge.

"No. Not ever, if I can help it, and stop asking."

I roll my eyes.

"I told you, baby, eye rolling doesn't look good on you."

"Wrong," I say, giving up on him wrapping up this convo so I can slip into the shower. I drop my towel and duck beneath halfway. "Everything looks good on me."

He chuckles, but it's cut short. "I'll be there as soon as he finds out you're there, no doubt. I think he hates me. That's why he's torturing me with you."

“Ha! Don’t take offense. He hates everyone.” I squeeze soap in my hand.

“I’ll see you soon.” Then I hang up, needing to get ready quickly for tonight. It begins in five hours, which means The Brothers are already here in Kiznitch, and now thanks to my selfie...

I pale, blood draining to my toes. *They’ll know I’m staying at The Castle.*

Shit. That was a rookie move.

I turn off the shower, wrap the towel around my body, and release my hair from the clip it was tied up in.

I open the door and pause at the four massive bodies all standing scattered in my room. I jerk, just enough for them to not ask why I was shocked, and squeeze the towel in my hand, casually making my way to the bed.

I pointedly ignore Keaton since I haven’t seen him for *two fucking years*. For Christmas, I made sure I was away in France fucking the Duke. It kept me busy and him away, all while keeping up the *bratty, slutty, and somewhat fucked-up* baby sister card.

“Oh, how lovely.” I scoop up my dress before Kyrin can examine it. “The four big bad wolves.”

“Why the fuck are you here?” Kyrin spreads his arms wide, and I finally bring my eyes to my frustrating brother. Heat rises in my chest and it takes all my strength to not cuss him out and ask him about Eli, and I would’ve by now if I didn’t like Eli and if I didn’t stress about the safety of his life after Kyrin would find out. I know he’s an Elite King, but the best thing for The Elite Kings and us is peace, because a war would not be pretty.

“Because I was invited, because I’m *Kiznitch*, and because I’m not your baby sister anymore, Ky! Leave me alone.”

Killian pushes out from the doorway, coming toward me. “I’m going to grab food.” He snakes his arm around my neck and pulls me in for a soft kiss on my head. “You guys can fight it out, but my money is on Cartier—like always.” He winks down at me before staggering back out the door. Kill has always been my favorite. He doesn’t suffocate me like the others, but I know if I’m ever in any danger, he would be the first to throw himself in the firing line.

“Cartier, you’re being reckless, fucking around half the world. Give your brother a break.” Ah, and then there’s King. My least favorite.

“I love you.” I bring my eyes to Kingston, squaring my shoulders in defiance. “But who I fuck is no one else’s concern, much less my *brother’s*.”

King shakes his *disapproving* head and leaves the same way Killian did. King is always on his high fucking horse ready to scold you like a child. It worked when I was younger. I loved him, worshipped him almost, because he taught me the things my father should have. But now, we fight more than we get along.

And then there were two.

Keaton breaks the silence with a deep chuckle that vibrates down every vertebra of my spine. He pushes up from where he was on my bed, and my body springs to life like hot live wire tearing through my veins.

He stops directly beside me, but I refuse to break eye contact with Kyrin, who most likely thinks it’s funny how protective Keaton is with me. He has always looked at Keaton’s vicious protection like extra help.

Little does he know, all it would take is one word for his world to shatter at his feet. *Tigger*. And mine, though, and I’m not ready to die.

“You think because you’ve grown tits you can walk around like we don’t own the steps you take?” His arm flies up in front of my face, squeezing the pillar to the bed.

Kyrin smirks, raising a dark brow. “Keaton, make your point without her tits coming out of your mouth unless you want my fist in yours.” Now it’s my turn to smirk.

The corner of my lip curls upward, and I slowly drag my eyes away from Kyrin, and up to a feral looking Keaton. His jaw is wider, sharper, *meaner*, and his eyes look darker, as if they’ve seen even more things that his mind is trying to bury. My smug smirk almost falters when my stomach drops to the floor at our eyes finally connecting after two years, but my stubbornness will always win out.

“Did you hear that, Keats?” I bat my lashes up at him. “Ky said—” His chest brushes against my arm as he closes the distance between us and his other hand that was tucked behind my back is suddenly on my ass.

His voice is enough for Kyrin to hear, but his tone is laced with malice. “I heard what he said, but he knows I’m right.”

My heart hammers against my chest as sweat slides down my temples, and I’m pretty sure that I’m going to need another shower.

“T, I can’t keep tabs on you if you’re fucking sleeping with everyone.” Kyrin lowers himself onto the bed and I quickly step away from Keaton, glaring up at him while clutching my towel tighter.

“*Fuck you*,” I mouth to him quietly.

“Later...” he answers loudly, flashing his white teeth.

I flip him off and round the bed. Damage control on Kyrin is getting easier the older I get, or the longer I’m working for Midnight Mayhem.

I lower myself beside him and rest my hand on his thigh. “You don’t need to stress about me. I told you I’m fine.” *And also, you motherfucker, you stuck an Elite King on my ass who won’t detach.*

“Shut the fuck up, Cartier. The fact that you actually think that only strengthens my case that you need it.” Ky turns to face me, wrapping his arm around my neck and pulling me beneath it. He kisses me hard on top of my head. “You know you stress us all out equally, but we all just deal with it in different ways.”

“Like for one,” Keaton butts in, and if I was still standing near him, I’m pretty sure my head would be going into his nose. “I gather distractions.”

Kyrin stares at Keaton, his face scrunched. “Is that what you’re calling them? Because I don’t know if that’s what I’d call them.”

Keaton ignores him, lowering onto the chair in the corner of the room.

“Okay, well, I’m glad we had this chat. Now do you both mind fucking off so I can get ready for tonight?”

“What?” Kyrin snaps at the same time Keaton does. “What the fuck do you mean? You’re not coming tonight...”

I peel his arm off me before he chooses to body slam me onto the bed and locks me to the pillars. “Yes, I am.” I hang my dress on the door in the bathroom, knowing that they’d both follow me.

“Says who? You’re not fucking Mayhem, you aren’t in the business yet, Cartier, you shouldn’t be anywhere near the recruit tonight.”

I keep my back turned to maintain my breathing. “I am Kiznitch, so it’s not entirely a bad idea to have me there.”

“Watch her!” Kyrin points to me, raising his phone to his ear and leaving the room. No doubt snitching on me to Mommy, only he’s about to learn that things have changed.

“What the fuck is going on with you?” Keaton asks, breaking my thoughts about my brother.

“What do you mean?” I duck beneath the arm he was using to cage me inside my closet, turning the light on in the bathroom.

Keaton snatches my wrist, and when he pulls me into his chest and kicks the door closed behind him, I’m sure. “What the fuck is happening with you?”

I bat my lashes up at him, watching as the flecks of ember that are scattered throughout his eyes burn to life. “You know... same old. Fucking, riding, drinking, partying. Not much else...”

He steps farther into my space, his fingers teasing the curve of my breast that spills out from the towel. “Cute that you think I’m stupid, Tigger. Only thing is you’re not cute at all.”

My heart hammers in my chest, and that familiar rush of adrenaline anytime he’s near surges through my body. “I don’t know... I’ve been told I can be pretty cute when I’m gagged, cuffed, and on my knee—” He slams his hand over my mouth and uses it to shove my weight back until I hit the basin.

Those embers in his eyes are looking more like shattered glass splintering through flames, and I try to take deep breaths around the heady scent of his cologne pressed against my mouth.

“You can fuck as many little princes as you want, Cartier. Truth is...” His other hand rests against my inner thigh and my eyes fly up to his.

He stops where my thigh meets my center. “She knows *she’s* mine, and when you’ve been fucked by a savage...” His finger slips between my folds and I cling to him like a nightmare, my eyes closing. “...a prince is hardly going to hit the spot.”

My eyes pop open and I reach behind his neck, just as he grabs me from behind my thighs and lifts me onto the counter, his lips smashing over mine. My body coils around itself the only way it knows how any time Keaton is touching me as he tears the towel away from my body and pulls his lips from mine, stepping back slightly.

His eyes travel down my body, only it feels as though his hands never left. “Fuck. How’d you get sexier?”

The outline in his jeans distracts me from my answer, so I spread my legs wide and slip my fingers over my pussy, bringing them to my lips to suck myself off. “Why are you still talking?” I smirk around my fingers, which admittedly is probably a bad idea.

In a flash he is back in front of me, whacking my hand away from me and shoving me down off the counter by a firm grip on my thighs. My feet land on the floor with a thud and he turns me around, pressing my head down against the cool marble countertop while spreading my legs wide.

“How many have you fucked since me?” He’s calm. Too calm. Keaton is like a storm that continues to circle until no one is left alive.

“What?” I rub myself against his crotch, biting down on my lip when I can feel him against the crack of my ass.

“How many?”

“I don’t know!”

“That many, huh?” He circles my cheek as the distinct sound of leather rubs against denim.

I try to stand to see what he’s doing, but his fingers dig into the back of my neck, forcing me facedown onto the counter. I rest my cheek on the cool counter.

“How many? Or I’m using my belt on your ass until you lose skin.”

My knees buckle, but he forces his between, holding me up.

Alexandra.

Eli. *Which he will never know.*

Two. Alexandra and I sleep together often. He has been my comfort fuck. The kind of sex that will bore you after a couple of months. The kind of sex that kills marriages.

“Cartier, I don’t have all day.”

“Four...” I lie, because part of me knows that if I tell him the truth he won’t believe me anyway, and... I have too much pride. I don’t want him to know that he has slept with more people than me, even though I already know that he has. He’s a Brother of Kiznitch. It doesn’t matter if he’s the *not so slutty* one of the group. Keaton has his needs, and his needs need to be met...

His finger slides between my gap and I moan slightly when he circles inside of me. “Four? I’ll want names, but for now...” His finger’s gone and leather bites into my ass cheek as he slaps it with his belt. “For now, I need this.” His voice is low, as if he’s struggling to keep his composure.

I don’t yelp. My teeth sink into my bottom lip to stop from giving him any kind of satisfaction that this hurts—because I know he needs it. I see it every time I look into his eyes that he likes inflicting pain.

Slap! Another, and I wince this time, a metallic taste sliding over the tip of my tongue when I bite too hard.

The warmth of his palm is too hot against my stinging ass, but when his fingers stride to my center and he cups my pussy from behind, the echo of the stings surrounding my cheek hits me right in the clit, and my pussy throbs as I ride his hand slowly, needing a release. Needing to feel him inside of me, watching him come undone.

His hand has gone, but he buries it in my hair and hooks his finger into my mouth, pulling on the side of my cheek.

Slap! Tears prick the corner of my eyes as I squeeze them shut to contain the pain radiating throughout my body. His fingers spread around my chin, tilting my head backward as I feel the tip of his cock at my entrance.

“It stops at four, Cartier...” he whispers, slowly burying himself inside of me as one last slap pierces my ass and I cry out until his hand slams over my mouth. He thrusts into me so roughly my head flies into the wall. “Nod so I know you understand me...”

I know I should, but all I want to do is fuck him until I can’t keep my eyes open anymore, and then when I close them, I want him to keep fucking me until I wake the next morning.

“Unless you want me to fuck you with my gun, I’d nod, baby girl...”

I nod, grinding against his groin to feel his fat girth splitting me open from the inside out.

“Good girl.” He pulls out, before gripping my hair in his fist and slamming his hips against my ass, throwing me farther up the counter with each thrust.

“Keaton, I—” I reach for him from behind, desperate to feel him in more than one way, when my nails catch his arm.

“Cartier!” I stop moving. Fuck. Kyrin is about to storm through that door if I don’t answer. “Where the fuck are you!” My eyes find the lock on the door and see the space where it should be if it’s locked.

“Keaton!” I whisper-yell over my shoulder, but he slows his thrusts, massaging the nape of my neck. It’s the gentlest he’s ever been with me, and if I wasn’t panicking right now, I’d probably melt. “You didn’t lock the door!”

The handle jiggles, turns, and—“Stop!” I scream, just as I tighten around Keaton’s cock. “I’m having a bath!”

The jiggling instantly stops. “Well, when you’re done, we need to talk.”

Keaton slams inside of me again, and my eyes roll to the back of my head as my pussy releases around him.

“Cartier?” Kyrin calls out again.

Keaton chuckles from behind me, tightening his grip and slamming inside of me in deep, hard thrusts. My clit rubs against the counter as his cock fills me to the brink. Wet moisture drips down my thighs as his balls slap against the curve of my ass.

“Yes!” I yell breathlessly, trying to hide my moan. “I’ll be down...”

I hear a door close in my room and Keaton finally pulls out of me, spins me around, and lifts me off the floor. I wrap my legs around his waist as he walks us backward until my back smashes against the glass wall that separates the shower. His dick slips back inside of me as he runs his tongue over the curve of my lower lip. “Fuck, I miss this.”

I grind against him, the pressure building deep in my core as he slams me up against the wall while deepening the kiss. “Gonna fuck you every fucking day until we leave, and when I leave, Cartier?”

“Mmm...” I dig my nails into his traps, dragging them down until I’m at his arm again. Wetness touches my fingers and I bring it up to my face.

“When I leave, no one is gonna come near you with their dick because any time they try, they’ll feel mine still inside of you.” His tongue swirls with mine, and I tilt my head to the side to give him more access. Keaton kisses like he fucks. Like he owns it.

Blood catches my eye on his arm from my scratching and I bring it to my mouth and lick it off, just as he slams harder and pushes me over the edge. I scream into the side of his neck as he squeezes me tightly around my waist, breathing heavily into my hair. Our hearts beat against each other for a few seconds before he lowers me to the floor. Sweat slips between us, and when I reach for the faucet again to turn the shower on, he shakes his head, pointing to the tub.

“You’re gonna need a bath after that...”

“What?” I smirk at him over my shoulder, turning the shower off and making my way to the bath. “I thought you’d want people to smell me on you...”

I push in the plug and turn on the hot water.

“Not talking about that, Tigger...” His finger grazes over my cheek and I wince, jumping away from him.

“Forgot about that.”

“You knew what you were getting into the second you spread your legs for me.” He bites down on the cork of a bright pink bottle, pouring the contents into the bath and spitting the top in with it. He holds my stare. I need to calm the fuck down. I haven’t seen him in two years, but it’s like seeing him with fresh eyes. His hair is still shorter around the sides, enough to see all his tattoos over his scalp, and longer on the top. Not too long, though, because it would get in the way while he’s riding, and he can’t have that. His eyes are the product of evil, dark and murky. His cheekbones sit high, sharp, and perfectly symmetrical, and his jaw seems to have gotten wider. Stronger. Firmer. Keaton has always been the one who looks different to the other brothers. He’s obviously handsome, but the kind that most people find intimidating because he looks like an asshole—and *is an asshole*—or worse. He has a void stare in his eyes twenty-four seven, and everyone wants to fuck him until they lock eyes and then they mostly change their mind. Boys like Keaton are a reminder for girls that things really do go bump in the night. Keaton could ruin everyone in his path, but for some reason... it never applies to me. I think I knew that from a young age. Growing up, I’d be confused when people would say they feared him, because he’s never that person to me. Yet. I hope never.

He turns the hot water off and starts the cold. “You just dozed off...”

“Oh...” I watch as he tosses an empty bottle of oil onto the basin, shoving his jeans farther down his legs and removing his shirt. How did he manage to do all of that without even removing his shirt? “What were you saying?” I turn sideways and slide my toes into the bubbles, holding my breath until I finally hit the surface of the water.

Keaton turns off the cold water and slides in behind, splashing me as he rests backward where the tub claws upward. “I was saying whatever secret you are hiding, by the time we leave, I’ll know what it is.” His eyes are closed so he can’t see me once again scanning him in a way that I’ve never done before. Why does he have to be literal perfection? It isn’t fair. It really isn’t. People this good looking should have a personality like Kill. Funny, light-hearted... *Funny*.

Keaton is none of those things.

“Get in the fucking tub, Cartier. It’s getting cold.”

Case in point.

I roll my eyes since I know he can't see me and drop my foot into the water. It's risky business us both being here in this moment. Kyrin could be trying to find him, or worse, put two and two together, but when it's just he and I, I don't see much of anything else that is going on around me. I know that I love Keaton. I love him just like I love all of them, but I'm starting to notice that the love I have for him gives me tunnel vision and... well... a sore ass.

"I'm not hiding anything from you." The lie is too easy. I play with the bubbles that hug my body, grateful for my back being turned to him even if his eyes are closed.

He slides forward, his arm wrapping around my belly to pull me farther into his chest. My muscles throb as if all my secrets display over them and he can read every single one.

"Relax..." he whispers into my ear, and my blood turns hot when I feel his lips graze my ear slightly. "I'll play the game you're playing, but you and I both know that I don't play to lose."

"Mmhmm," I murmur sleepily, finally relaxing against him. My finger circles the tattoos over his forearm, and I stop when I see two cherries. "When did you get this one?" It's simple, but the color is a lot richer than the usual red.

"We ain't talking about me, Tigger."



Seven

Cartier

I shove Keaton out of my room just in time for Maya and Val to drop their shit all over my floor and fill it with sweet marijuana smoke. It's not uncommon for us three to be together, because we usually are for all family and Mayhem events, but this is the first time I've seen them while one, not being able to tell them that I'm getting thoroughly fucked by Keaton, and two... well, the biggest secret of all.

"You know, I actually kind of like recruits. It's all creepy, dark, and sexy..." Val says, swiping the tip of her lipstick over her bottom lip. She went with red—shocker, she always does. Val, Maya, and I have known each other all our lives. Maya and Killian are closer, but we're still sisters. We all fight as much as we love. Mainly because of something Val said and something Maya does.

Maya spins around to face me, her tight curls falling over one slender shoulder and her bright green eyes landing on mine. "I think tonight is going to be different, because well..." She tilts her head and I know what she's thinking. "Cartier is finally allowed out of her box to play."

"Aww." Val slips her shoes onto her feet, and I zone out on them both as I finish fixing my hair. I can't decide whether I want it out or up, so I do

both. I loosely French braid one side and leave the other out in soft waves, curling down my back. My makeup is not my style at all, but after Kyrin threw his toys out of the cot about me coming tonight, I felt chaos deep in my bones wanting to play. My lips are beige, but my eyes are lined thick and dark, smudged on the outer edges. I've been contoured, colored in, and crimped to perfection thanks to the makeup and hair team, but the dress... the dress is something I need to thank my mom for. The nude mesh material clings to my curves, giving the illusion that I'm naked, but over my breasts there are little black lace patterns that cover my nipples. It flows to the floor, swaying around my ankles every time I take a step.

"Photo!" Val interrupts my checking, and I step backward and beneath her arm.

"Not in here. We can use the patio."

Maya scoops up the rolled joint that was on the bedside table, just as there's a knock on the door.

"Come in!" I call out, and Perse sashays through, holding her clutch and wearing a silk gown the color of her hair. "Wow!" Perse kind of slid into our dynamics quickly. Thank God, because since she has been around, King has been easier to deal with. And by easier, I mean he's too busy with her to annoy me.

"Thanks. I couldn't decide what I wanted, and since you know King and I are still trying to figure out what we are doing, I don't really want to ask him for advice."

Maya laughs, lighting the end of her smoke as Val opens the doors that spread out onto the cobblestone patio.

"You're both fucking deluded," Val mumbles beneath her breath, pulling the net curtains wide. "This is a view..."

I make my way to the patio and look over the edge. The usual sparse lawn is now decked out with a large Moroccan tent with tea lights hanging around and leading to the entrance. A bar is set up outside, as music plays from the system. I haven't been in the tent yet, but we all know we don't go light. The sun is barely setting beneath the large redwood trees that sit behind the yard.

I reach for Perse, pulling her onto the patio with us all.

"Prop the phone on the railing so we can get one with our outfits." I listen to Val, setting my phone up and hitting the self-timer. We take a range of shots before flipping it over to do some selfies of us all.

“You look beautiful, Cartier.” Perse follows me back into the room.

“She’s right.” Val flicks the little bag of cocaine with her finger. “You look different.”

I snatch the bag off Val and pop it open, scattering the powder onto my nightstand before taking the rolled-up bill from Val and snorting a line.

Chemicals hit the back of my throat as I clear my nostril, then flick the bill onto Maya’s lap. “First of all, it’s because of the makeup.”

“Nope.” Maya shakes her head, leaning down and taking the second. “You’ve either been getting fucked good or you’re carrying some heavy shit.”

Or both.

Val snorts the next before handing it to Perse. There are still a couple left, but with the amount of supply Val always has, we won’t be running out before the night is over.

“No, seriously, what happens at these things?” Perse stumbles behind us and I wait until they’re all out before locking my door. “I mean, my initiation wasn’t the typical...”

I scoff way too quickly. “Sorry. It’s just that I have heard about it.”

“They’re usually fucked up. I don’t know how tonight will go since the Ice Queen of Kiznitch is present, but who knows. Maybe The Brothers will loosen your lead since you’re looking all grown up.” I don’t bother to tell Maya that the age difference between her and me isn’t large at all. Maybe I should have hung with the Angels and Demons. They’re probably better company.

We haven’t even made it halfway down the hall before the first question comes from Val. “So you gonna tell me who this boy is? And don’t bother trying to say it’s that pretty French boy because you and I both know it takes grit to gain the attention of one of us.”

We land on the bottom floor and a waiter passes with champagne flutes on his tray. I snatch one quickly, sinking half the glass. The Castle has been kept simple, since everyone will be outside.

“What’s your damage now, baby girl?” Killian pulls me in under his arm, kissing me on top of the head. The lobby is dimly lit, with a path leading out to the outdoor area where the tent is.

I stare up at Kill, my cheeks stinging from the smile on my face. “Everything.”

“Everything? That’s bold coming from the girl who has been protected from *everything*,” Val sneers, and this is what is wrong with Val. She’s bitchy for no reason at all. Almost too bitchy for me at times. I don’t know how Maya tolerates it.

“Well,” Kill says, taking my hand in his. It would look intimate to people who don’t know who I am to The Brothers, but to him and me it’s natural. “All I know is I’ve had to talk a Brother down for the past hour since he found out about you attending tonight. Please don’t fuck anyone. I don’t want to wipe blood off my suit tonight...”

I sigh into my flute. “Kyrin needs to settle down.”

The corner of Killian’s mouth tilts upward. “Oh?” His bright blue eyes flash with gleam. “We talking about Kyrin?”

I pale as my stomach hits the floor, my fingers twitching in his.

He barks out a loud laugh. “Calm down.” Kissing me on the top of my head. “You might need more to drink, though.”

I empty the contents of my glass and we all start making our way through the family room and to the patio that stretches out toward the lawn. Tea lights light the way down to the entry of the tent and around the little makeshift bar outside. Music and laughter already spill out from the split entrance. We’re about forty minutes late, which is perfect. The recruitment doesn’t start until midnight, so that gives me two hours to get drunk and not do something stupid.

“You need a girlfriend.” I graze Killian’s hand as he leads us down the steps.

“Ha!” He chokes on his laugh. “When hell freezes over.”

“Well, you know they call me...”

His laughter bubbles over the clicking of our heels against the cobblestone path, and we stop outside the door.

Killian looks to the girls who are far enough away to not hear, and then back to me. “Whatever is going on with you, you know we will protect you at all costs, right?”

I reach up to touch his cheek. Killian’s soft ass baby skin, it’s all wasted on him. “Yes, I know.”

“And there is a secret?” His eyes narrow, falling to my lips. Killian is the master of trickery, so I need to be careful with my words.

“Yes,” I answer him truthfully, stepping out of his warm embrace. I cast a glance over my shoulder, grinning. “But it’s not like you boys don’t have

your own secrets.”

His mouth hangs open slightly, but it’s too late because I step through the entrance quickly to get away from him. I’m paralyzed by the beauty. Being in this world, I’m somewhat sensitized to money and opulence, but every now and then, something blows my mind. This is one of those things. The tent stretches up to the sky in large drapes, with lilac neon lights following the trail. There are no tables, no seating, just a makeshift stage in the center of the room.

I snatch another champagne flute from a passing waiter, sweeping it to my mouth.

Killian sneaks behind me and tugs me back under his arm, kissing me on the head. They’ve all always done it. The small little forehead kisses, which for so long I liked. They make me feel cherished and loved by them, which I know I am, but now it makes me feel like they’re trying too hard to keep me young. Too small. As if they don’t want and can’t see me grow up.

“I’ll be back. Don’t get into trouble.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes since I don’t want to draw any attention to myself.

“Cartier,” a voice whispers from behind me, and I don’t bother to turn in a hurry. “You know what tonight is going to entail, are you ready for that?”

I finish swallowing my champagne, allowing the tangy bubbles to fall to my empty stomach before answering. “Yes.” I turn to face Kaius. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Good.” He doesn’t look directly at me as my mom swoops in, holding her gown by the tail. She’s wearing all black—shocker.

“Hello, my dear, now remember what I said...” My smile doesn’t reach my eyes as I relax at my mother’s presence. “Stay low and don’t draw too much attention to yourself, especially for your brother.”

I gulp the rest of my champagne like a Viking and hold my breath as the effects of the alcohol tickle my brain. “Sure, Mom.” My father arrives beside her, though still managing to stay slightly behind like a shadow, constantly reminding me of how much he can take.

The lighting dims and all talking hushes. The Brothers are somewhere behind me because I can feel Keaton’s eyes on my bare back. When you’ve looked into each other’s souls the same way Keaton and I have, you don’t need to see each other to know when the other is around.

Music plays, and the tent parts open. Turning over my shoulder, I finally connect with Keaton, who is already watching me. My mouth waters and my thighs slam together as if he could touch me from all the way over there. He's wearing slacks and a long-sleeved shirt rolled to his elbows with the buttons carelessly undone at the top. His hair is ruffled, and the stubble on his jaw does nothing to hide the fact that it's as sharp as a samurai sword.

His eyes narrow on mine and goose bumps explode over my flesh. I quickly look away before I do something really stupid like eye fuck him from across the room. My feet start taking me toward the stage.

"Cartier—" my mother whispers harshly, but I ignore her. All of Midnight Mayhem is here, as well as some retired members. People of Kiznitch are here too, those who were invited, but everyone is pressed around the edges of the tent, giving me a perfect path straight to the stage. "How Can You Love Me" by Kiiara starts playing as the curtain spreads wider and I take center stage, tapping the mic with my finger.

Keaton, Kyrin, and Kill are noticeably closer to the stage than they were moments before. A single light beams on me, and my mouth twitches up in a smirk before I can fight it away. The stage seeps into your pores and ignites a power deep inside of you that you don't realize you have if you're Kiznitch, and in this moment, I wish I were in the show. This will have to do. People whisper among themselves, but you can see the divide of those who have already heard of who I am, and those who are confused.

"Eight." I turn to the curtain and watch as the first girl shuffles out from behind, wearing a shimmering glitter gown with her hair in a fancy up-do. Following behind her is a young guy around her age, smiling and winking at people who will look at him. *Agh*. We don't need another him... another fucking Killian. The next is another girl, and another. When four girls and four guys are lined across the stage, I turn back to the mic. Grabbing it off the stand, I flick it onto the ground before circling the first boy who came out smirking, my fingers on his chest. Heat rises to my face when I feel Keaton's anger radiate from below, but I continue my task at hand. This is my first initiation, and I won't fuck it up just because he's here, though I wish they all weren't. This is usually Delila's job, but oh well...

His abs are tight, but his skin is too clean. I rest my hand on his abs from behind, running them up to his throat and squeezing. "Knees." He falls to his knees in front of me, but I remain focused on the crowd.

“What the fuck!” Kyrin’s voice shocks me and my eyes fly up to him. He’s making his way onto the stage. I didn’t expect them to actually interrupt it.

“Kyrin...” I pull my arm away from his grip before he can snatch it, but it’s no use because he’s faster.

“Don’t fucking *Kyrin* me. Everyone who had something to do with Cartier hosting, get in the fucking back *now*!” Pretty sure spit flies out of his mouth before he’s dragging me from the stage and down the aisle, straight to the exit.

“Fuck, Kyrin!” I try to pull myself out of his grip again, but it doesn’t work. The frosty air slaps me across the face once we hit it, and I spin around as soon as he releases me, smacking him in the chest. “I am not a fucking child anymore!”

People slowly follow us outside, and I can see in my peripheral that they all surround us. I’m guessing it is, as he put it, those who decided I was hosting. Truth is, no one decided but me. I wasn’t supposed to do it, it was a last-minute decision to reclaim my power that always gets taken from me any time The Brothers are around.

“Kyrin, let your sister go!” My mom puts her hand on his arm, but he flinches away from her.

“Was this your idea?” He turns his rage to her. “Hmmm? Because I’m pretty sure you damn well know that I don’t want to see her fucking anyone, much less all eight of the recruits!”

My mother’s anger reverberates off her and she takes a step toward Kyrin. “You think I would—” She stops herself quickly before her face relaxes and she turns back to me. “No, it was my idea. She wants more time, Kyrin, and you’re going to need to start giving that to her.”

My knees weaken and I fall backward, only I stammer into a hard wall. I close my eyes and my arm falls to the side, as my fingers find his. My panicking subdues when he squeezes me gently, tucking me farther back into him.

With Keaton in my hand, I open my eyes onto my brother, making sure he can’t see mine and Keaton’s hands together. “Ky, you need to get over this. You’re not the first Brother to have a sister in Mayhem.”

“No.” Kyrin glares at me finally, and for the love of God, my brother needs to find another hobby. “But I’m the first who isn’t into incest, so...”

Keaton's thumb caresses the palm of my hand, lighting a fire beneath my skin that I want to feed until I take my final breath.

"Well, you guys can fight this out. I won't continue as the host, but if you'll excuse me..." I give Keaton one last squeeze before passing my father, keeping my eyes locked on his as I round the corner of the tent. I can still hear Kyrin and my mother bickering, but now that I'm hidden in the shadow behind the tent, I can handle them. They are both fire signs, so any time they fight, they explode, which is why my mother makes it so she doesn't do a lot of mothering as far as Kyrin goes—which is exactly why he thinks he's not only my brother, but my mother and father too.

I wish she would have just parented instead.

"Not tonight," Kaius' voice breaks from behind me, and I close my eyes briefly, tilting my head up to the dark sky. "It's too risky with your brother around like a papa Dove, and your mother deciding to finally be one."

I inhale a deep breath of cold air, before finally turning to face him. Kaius looks like King. The dark hair, broody personality, and bossy nature. I don't know why he does the things he does, and as time goes on, I've found truth in the cracks that Kaius tries to conceal. One thing is absolute, though. I need to start listening to him if I want to live.



Eight

Keaton

Present

If I have to watch Cartier prance around Europe with another fucking toy on her arm, I'm going to chop hers off and send it to Kyrin as a suicide request.

"Lilith still hasn't come out?" I ask Kyrin as he flicks Sass' fire sticks around the air like a juggler.

"Nope," Kyrin answers but doesn't stop what he's doing.

"You think you should maybe fucking tell her?" I swipe through my Instagram, stopping on a photo Cartier posted five minutes ago.

"No, because he had said not to. Something's wrong. There's more to whatever he has done or is doing—" he blows out the fire ends and tosses them onto the dirt ground, "—and he hasn't told me for a reason." It has been five weeks since we had Christmas with Madison, Bishop, and the rest of the EKC—sans Eli—and in those weeks, it's as though Lilith has become worse. She's retreated into her shell more, after finally coming out after having them both. I know she needs them both, not just one, but fuck. I don't know how they do it with three of them, fucking one is enough.

“Yeah, I mean, I get that.” Should I like this photo or not? She’s perched on her bike, her teal hair in the wind and tucked beneath her helmet. The greenery of the forest sits behind her like an oil painting and I zoom in on the forest, my eyes narrowing as recognition slaps me across the face. *Motherfucker.*

“Hey, boys...” Her voice barrels in from behind me and I squeeze my phone in my hand, clenching my jaw. She went AWOL for fucking months, and every time she does it, I become angrier at her.

“What the fuck!” Kyrin waves his arms up. “Where have you been?”

She drops down on the chair beside me, crossing her leg over the other. Her familiar perfume is like a memory being replayed across my mind. My leg muscles tense when her bare thigh grazes mine. “Well, I think you and I both know where I’ve been.” I clench my fists to stop myself from choking her to death.

My phone starts vibrating in my hand, and I push up from the plastic chair, swiping it to answer without looking because that’s the kind of dumb shit she does to me.

“What?”

“Aw, is that a way to greet your girl?” My lip curls, but I fight the urge to cuss her out, ducking between the other small stages. It’s not until I’ve slid behind the triple ring of death and I’m back outside that I answer.

“Fuck you. What do you want?”

She laughs on the other end, her voice coming in at barely a whisper. “We have a problem that needs to be taken care of. How soon can you get here?” I turn back to face the tent when my eyes land on Cartier, brows raised and arms folded across her chest. She looks way too fucking good right now—*way too good*—because all I want to do is fucking strangle her until she begs me to stop.

Typical problems when it comes to her.

“Tomorrow is the earliest. Got a target here before I leave.”

Cartier’s mouth curves upward.

“I’ll see you at noon tomorrow.”

I slide my phone down my face when Cartier stops within earshot, pushing it back into my pocket while keeping my eyes on hers. “How long have you been back?”

Her mouth opens, momentarily distracting me from my own question. She has the perfect lips. Soft, full, and swollen. “Two days.”

My eyes fall down her body. Booty shorts, Vans, and a little crop top that shows a slit of her belly. “And you’ve been riding?” No one needed to tell Cartier how to ride. She is just as good, if not slightly better, than us. The fact that she has been dancing around the triple ring of death and knows how to ride the rings too speaks for itself.

“Yes.” Her face is free of makeup, her hair tied in a high ponytail. She pushes from the threshold, closing the distance between us. “Who was on the phone just then?”

I stare down at her, making sure to keep myself anchored before I get too lost in her gaze. “Oh, how you would love to know...”

“Actually, I wouldn’t.” Her shoulder slams against mine in passing, but my fingers catch hers and we both pause at the fire that burns between us. She turns to face me. “What’s the matter?”

“Where are you going? Are you back for good?”

“Never.” She flashes a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. I see behind the words she speaks. “Always just for a little while.” She breaks our connection and I watch as she swings her leg over her KTM and shoots forward, heading toward the lake house, no doubt. After the recruit a year ago, she threw herself completely into a bratty phase. It fucking drove me crazy, but seeing her now seems different. She seems... off.

“Did she know anything?” Kyrin passes me, and I follow him to where our bikes are parked.

“I didn’t ask her about Eli.”

“I’m fucking frustrated and desperate to find out what the fuck is going on, and since they were so close for the entire three years, I’d bet that she knows something more than what she’s letting on.” He is right. Cartier definitely knows more about Eli.

I fire up my bike. “I got called out.”

Kyrin turns his head over his shoulder. “When?”

“Told her I’d be there tomorrow at noon.” I roll up to where he’s sitting, since the loud twang of our two-stroke engines is almost too much.

“You know who it is?”

“Do I care?” I ask, looking out to the distance.

Past

Twelve years old

The first thing I learned when I picked up a gun was realizing that I didn't want to use one. I was ten, so that's saying something.

My father moved behind King's dad, as they both stared down at all four of us. "You are Kiznitch soldiers, but you're more than that," King's father said, walking back and forth with his hands buried in his pockets. "You come from a line of Brothers. An even smaller family unit than Kiznitch. You will learn how to take a life, give a life, and fuck the life out of other women. You will perform, give people what they want, and learn how to master your skill. Killian, telepathy is your forte, but you can all practice. You are all gifted." The office door opened, and he stopped talking as we spun around to see who it was. King's mom walked in with Cartier dragging her feet behind her, her bright blue eyes peering up at King's father. I'd always felt protective over her, but I was pretty sure we all felt that way. She was the only girl out of The Brothers' line, we had to protect her. It was pure, natural instinct.

"What is it?" King's father said, looking between Cartier and his wife.

"I've got to take her," she whispered into King's father's ear. She probably thought we couldn't hear, but we did. We just didn't care because it was Kiznitch, and everyone was safe in Kiznitch as long as you were. "They're asking questions and I fear—" She stopped talking when she realized we were all watching her.

"Just go," King's father said, brushing the doorway. "She needs it."

King's mom nodded and then dragged Cartier out the door. Cartier spun around at the last minute and her eyes collided with mine. Her smile spread wide, her little cheeks turning cherry red. She made my body feel weird, and I kind of hated her for it.

"There's an organization that operates behind Midnight Mayhem. We don't get the show without them. They're all Kiznitch, and they're all loyal, but what they want goes, and their personal soldiers?" He made a point to stare directly at all of us. His office was vast, filled with modern furnishings and a large chandelier, but right now it felt small. As if there wasn't enough air for us all to be here. "Are you four."

Present

Keaton

The music is loud, and I cut the bike off, saddling her near the lake house. People are coming in and out carrying drinks and food. Cartier has been back for less than thirty minutes, and she is already throwing a party.

I step through the front door and instantly see Kohen and a couple of other girls in the lounge, playing on the Xbox. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows give a direct view to the bed of the lake out the back, but the sliding doors are opened out to the patio, where people are surrounding a fire pit that's lit inside an old barrel. Cartier isn't stupid, and she's not thirsty. She's Kiznitch, but she's smart, so she knows not to throw any of the parties that are usually hosted on Village grounds.

"She's outside." Maya steps up beside me, handing me a full glass of whiskey. "You may need this."

"Why?" I swirl the liquid around in the glass, watching as it creates a small tornado in the center.

"Pssh." Her head jerks back, hiding her smile behind her glass. "Because it's Cartier and you always need a drink when it comes to her." I don't know if Maya is being coy and finally picking up on the back and forth that Cartier and I do, or if it's just that obvious that the girl is a headcase.

"Thanks." I leave Maya and make my way through the doors, but not before calling out, "Don't drink too much of that shit. We're on the road tomorrow night and, well, you're you."

She flips me off, tipping her head back and shooting her drink back like a fucking college student.

I laugh, passing the people surrounding the fire and making my way to the swing that's connected to the tree down near the water. Kyrin put it in when Cartier was four years old and demanded to have one to fly into the water. Her words.

"You know, people are starting to notice..." Cartier says, pushing the swing a little higher the closer I get. She's in the same clothes she was in earlier, only now she has a glass of whiskey dangling between her fingers.

"Notice what?" I tease, grabbing the rope and forcing her to a stop by standing directly in front of her.

She tilts her head up at me, squinting her eyes against the burning orange of the setting sun. “Your little plaything inside is going to notice too, you know. Which, by the way, I—” I wrap my fingers around her chin, forcing her mouth to widen by pressing my thumb down on her lower lip inside her mouth.

“Shut up. Jealousy doesn’t look good on you.”

Her eyes narrow, and I smirk when I notice that same fire put her in a chokehold. I release her mouth so she can speak. “First of all, I’m not jealous. I’m glad someone else is taking your... wrath that isn’t me.” My finger twitches. “Which by the way, this party could go both ways and I’m not responsible. Everyone is Kiznitch and horny.”

I kneel down in front of her so I can watch her reaction. I need to know what she knows, and it’s obvious that she’s hiding shit. I don’t care about her bratty antics. The bitch is mine, and she damn well fucking knows it. “Do you know about Eli?”

Her face turns pale, and I watch as her mouth straightens to a flat line, her eyes drift over my shoulder. “No.”

Lie.

The battle starts in my head. Whether I should pull her up in her blatant dishonesty, or whether I should just let her do what she’s doing and watch. Cartier has become a recluse over the years. She thinks I don’t notice how she disappears for months on end and comes back with a more distant look in her eye. The worst part is that if she was anyone else, we would extract all the info we needed from her with or without her consent, but because she’s Cartier, she’s untouchable.

She stands from the swing, her palm resting against my chest. “It’s funny.”

“What’s funny?” I ask, one wrong word away from drowning her in the lake.

Her lashes fan over her cheeks every time she blinks. “That you all think that we’re safe now.”

She turns to walk away, but I catch her hand with mine, my eyes flying up to the house for a second to make sure no one is watching our exchange. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means what I said.” Then she leaves, and I watch as her ass sways with each step. I need to find Kyrin and call a meeting because whatever

she's holding on to is deep. I can feel it the same way I can feel her other emotions.



Nine

Cartier

There are cages that line the edges of the wall to form little rooms and lights flash to the beat of the music.

“Are they figuring it out?” Eli says from beside me, a glass of whiskey in his hands. I watch as the girls inside the cages rub against one another.

“No.” I lean back on the bar, crossing my legs in front of me. I wasn’t there the night Eli and Dominic crossed paths while they were here the last time, but I’m beginning to think that my brother and Lilith missed a massive hint as to what Eli was truly dealing with.

I lean into him, ignoring the beeping in the background. Dominic has been trying experimental drugs on people for a year now, according to Eli, but he still hasn’t told me why he’s where he is and why he must be here. “You can come back, E. You know we have your back too.”

Eli leans down and snorts the line of coke that’s spread over the marble counter. The Connoisseur is a club that is built into the old city tunnels which run beneath the ground. Dominic is known to traffic drugs and guns by using this system. He’s about as rotten as they come.

Eli tugs on the black collar around his neck. “Can’t.” He slams his empty glass onto the table, and I search his features. He’s lost a lot of

weight since I last saw him, which was when he was with Mayhem.

“Why?” He never hid from me that he would be leaving; I had known long before he “died”. He has just never said why. I think Kyrin assumes it has something to do with what happened before he left, but it doesn’t. Eli has been talking about this for years.

“The takeover, Cartier—” His eyes meet mine, and it’s the first time I’ve seen him bare so much vulnerability to me. “You and I both know it’s going to happen.”

I pause my movements, my hands squeezing the glass that’s resting on my thigh. “How do you know about the takeover?”

He raises his brows. “Everyone knows.”

My brain fuses and all I hear is the buzzing of white noise. “No—what?” I place my glass back onto the counter, turning to face him completely and ignoring all of what is happening in the background.

“You already know, Cartier. You can lie to The Brothers, but not to me. You know everything there is to know about the takeover—in fact...” He pauses and my throat throbs from the words that are stuck inside of it. “I would go as far as to say you’re doing *what you need to do* to make sure it works in your favor.” He’s right. I can’t lie to him. Eli doesn’t see me the same way as The Brothers do. He doesn’t tiptoe around my feelings or treat me like a fragile little flower who can’t get her petals touched.

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Neither can I, but just so you know... it’s not just Midnight Mayhem that this is going to affect.”

I was always confused when it came to talking with Eli about anything to do with his Elite Kings’ world, but he never really spoke about it, so it was never enough to be annoying.

“The Kings?” I whisper, finally turning to face what’s happening behind me. Naked bodies are twirling together in the cages. Sex after sex after sex. It plays continuously like a porn that won’t stop. The live band starts playing another song, and I tilt my head to the side, watching the woman grip the mic around her fingers and start singing the hook of a familiar tune.

“Wait...” The room tilts slightly, and I grip the back of Eli’s chair. “What’s happening?”

“You know that woman?” Eli asks, and I turn back to face him, but everything slides in triples. I reach out to touch his face, but my hands move through the air.

“Yes. I watched her play in New York one time with Nial.”

Eli’s eyes fly up behind me and he launches off his chair, hitting the floor in a thud. “E... I.” Everything goes black.

Mold sticks to the back of my throat, and the distinct sound of water hitting concrete wakes me out of my slumber. Metal cages surround me like iron pillars, and I fly up to my feet. I trip over a hump on the floor when I launch forward, hitting the hard ground with a slap. I push myself up slightly, turning over my shoulder to see what it was. The outline of a body lies facedown with blood pooling around his face. I could know this person and not know. Crawling over to him on my knees, I swipe away the brain matter and chunks of hair, rolling him over onto his back. His eyes come to mine. Pale and white. Unfamiliar. I stand back to my feet and scream out a frustrated cry.

“Ahhh, you’re awake.”

I jerk in shock, spinning around and reaching for the iron bars. Whoever he is, he blends with the shadows in the corner, unwilling to move. “Where’s Eli?” Within those three years of training, I’m finally glad for the second year. *Training. Combat. The art of manipulation.*

“Don’t worry about him just yet, *Ice Queen.*”

My shoulders straighten and I tilt my head when he finally steps out from the dark. Black hair that curls behind his ears, tanned skin, and a lion tattoo that snakes up his forearm.

“Well, if it isn’t Bam Bam Ricaiah.”

Bam Bam’s smile turns wicked, the unlit cigarette hanging loosely from between his fingers. “Well, if it isn’t my favorite Ice Queen...”

“Huh,” I purr, stepping back slightly to put some distance between us. “If I was truly your favorite, then what am I doing on this side while you’re there?” Bam Bam and I don’t have a necessarily clear history, but we do have one... nonetheless...

Past

Year Two

Delila took my hand and led me toward a black city car idling on the curb. I should’ve asked where we were going, but I was a year into my training

now, so I'd become conditioned to her moods and the consistency of our training days—which wasn't every day. Thankfully.

"Where are we going?" I couldn't help myself.

Delila stood with the door open, gesturing inside with a sweep of her hand. She wore a tight black dress with spaghetti straps and long pointed boots. She made sure to dress me appropriately too, which only made me more nervous to know where she was taking us tonight. Delila was anything but subtle. She was a wicked teacher and I clung to every word she spoke like a good student.

"Tonight, my little prodigy, is an important lesson." She swiped her diamond crusted fingers over her thigh.

"I thought it was all important."

She giggled, but it wasn't loud. "As they are." Her brown eyes rested on mine. "This is different, though." Her lips turned thin, as if she was remembering a memory that she would rather not.

"How so?" My thighs squeezed together, and I felt the buckle of my holster graze against my skin.

"The man you will meet tonight is a very dangerous man, but no one knows of him yet." She turned her head and looked out the window. I waited for her to continue, needing her to elaborate. I knew dangerous men. I was raised by them and was now best friends with one. Delila knew this, so her announcing it in this tone sent shivers over my skin. "No one must know about him, Cartier. Not ever. Not until at least"—she swallowed and her throat contracted—"the time is right."

We continued down the road, and when our car pulled up to a gated community, I stopped, turning back to face Delila. She was staring at me closely. "I'm leaving you here. You will spend a year with him."

"With whom?" My hands flew up, exasperated. "Who is this person?"

Delila's hand came to my cheek. "He's going to teach you so much during this time, but you won't be the same when I see you, our little Cartier. You will need to tell your little friend about him, and your appearances will still be kept. Don't worry about anything else. I'll handle it." She smiled wide. "I'll see you soon."

Present

I stare back at Bam Bam and watch as he takes three large steps until he's standing directly in front of me. Dressed in a charcoal suit and blood-red tie, it's as though he steps right out of my memory and lands in my present.

"Cartier Nero, you've grown since the last time I saw you."

I force a smile on my face, rolling my lips beneath my teeth to hide my snarl. I never was very good at hiding my distaste. "Mm-hmm. I did a whole year with you, Bam Bam."

"That you did..." His eyes fall to my feet and I feel his stare lick me from head to toe. "And what did I teach you?"

My mouth opens for a moment, but I stop the words from coming out. "To never show my hand. In combat, deceit, and definitely not in manipulation."

His hand disappears inside his pocket and he dangles a set of keys in front of my face. "And what are you going to do for me if I let you out of here? Can you stay on track without sliding off?" His head tilts and I lose myself on the scar that he has running down the side of his face. Beginning from the forehead, right down to his lip. Delila had said he was handsome once, and you could see it—until you knew what he was like.

"Yes, Bam Bam..." I purr, keeping my tone soft and gentle the way I know he likes. "It won't happen again."

"Good." He uses the keys to unlock my cell, before looking over his shoulder back to the shadow he came from. "Dove, take Cartier to Eli and then show her out."

My teeth clench as my eyes find Dove, her smile wickedly bright. She's wearing a black leather crop top and leather pants, and though her hair is messy all over her shoulders, her makeup is perfection.

"Come on, Mayhem. You're done here." I let her take my arm and drag me through the room until we hit a door that takes us to a flight of stairs. It's then that I realize we are in someone's basement.

Dove closes the door behind us, and I pause at the top, looking from left to right. I'm about to ask where Eli is when he rounds the corner, his suit immaculate but his eyes void.

"E..." I run into his arms and squeeze him around the neck. So I've managed to work up a name for myself among those who matter, but whenever I'm around Eli, I melt.

"Hey, Skippy. Let's get you back." He stares at Dove over my shoulder until she finally shrugs, dancing away while singing a remake of "Layla".

Eli grabs me around my upper forearm and directs me down a long corridor, until we reach an elevator. He hits the button angrily. And then hits it again.

“E, what the fuck are you doing getting into bed with Bam Bam?”

And again. Finally, the metal doors part and he drags me in with him. It’s not until they close that he turns to me. “I love you, but you cannot come back here looking for me again, Cartier. It’s done. The only reason why he allowed us to still speak is so he could know where you were.” He finishes the sentence with a whisper, and his face pales.

The doors open again and he’s dragging me out into an underground garage filled with Euro cars.

Eli pushes a button and the lights flash on a Lambo. “I mean it, Cartier.”

I swing open the door and slide in, wincing when the bruise on my thigh presses against the Italian leather. “I don’t understand.” Maybe I shouldn’t have drunk so much last night, but the little lake episode with Keaton left me on edge.

“He wants you. It’s always been you. That much, I’m sure.”

“What!” I yell, and he fires up the car and pulls up the ramp and onto the driveway of whatever house we just came out of. I turn around to see the outside. Large trees shade the front, slightly hiding the white and beige walls. It’s as large as it felt inside.

“Wait...” I turn back in my chair. “Are you telling me that the reason why you left was because of me?”

Eli turns over his shoulder. “Yes, Cartier. And now I need you to do what you’re meant to do and run Mayhem. Please. Go with them on their tour, keep a watchful eye on all of them, especially Luna.” My heart turns to liquid the second my niece’s name is mentioned. “I’ll check back when I find out something else.” He looks between me and the road, his eyes wide with panic. “Cartier, do you understand what I’m saying? Do you still have Jordan and Chris?”

“Yes, of course, but—”

“—no buts!” he yells, and it’s the first time I’ve heard Eli raise his voice, much less raise it at me. His eyes close and his jaw tightens. He’s doing that thing Kyrin does when I’ve done something to make him angry. “Cartier.” His tone softens. “I need you to keep everyone safe. You’re the only one who knows what’s going on, and I’ll figure out the rest.”

“The takeover? They found a sponsor?” My voice is barely above a whisper. The takeover has been in the talks for three years. It was one of the first things Delila spoke with me about when she brought me in. A league of powerful people wanting to overturn Midnight Mayhem. It’s not about money. When you have money, the idea of gaining more is too easy. It’s always power. Power is the one thing money can’t buy, and all of these rich assholes love to flash their monopoly around the room to pretend that they have it.

“Have you seen Lilith?”

I shake my head, squeezing the handle of the door. Lilith isn’t the type of woman to take lies lying down. When she finds out about Eli being alive, it’s going to be chaos for us all. “No. Not since I left. I only just saw Keaton and Kyrin last night for the first time.”

“Keep her close.” Eli’s hands clench the steering wheel. “Just keep her close.” He continues to drive us away, and the farther we are, the more relaxed he becomes. I don’t know what else to say to him that I haven’t already said, but I wasn’t expecting him to tell me that his disappearing might have had to do with the takeover. That his disappearing had to do with me.

“One more question.” I clear my throat and wait until he pulls up to stop outside the gated entry to The Village. “When Dominic broke into the apartment all those years ago, he came for me, not for you?”

Eli’s eyes glass over, the corners of his mouth curving upward. Not a lot. Just enough to confirm. “It’s complicated, but I struck a deal.” If Eli struck him a deal, that means that—

I pale. “Eli, you dragged The Kings into this?”

“Cartier.” His brows raise toward his hairline. “Get out of the car and look after our family, and the rest of them like you’re trained to do.”

“I’m going to have to bring The Brothers in or they’ll pick it out. Keaton already knows something is wrong with me. It’s only a matter of time before they’re using Killian’s juju.”

“I won’t tell you how to do your boss things, but I will say that once you bring them in, expect them to baby you even more. Kyrin will continue to interfere over his protection of you.”

I sigh, my fingers coming to the handle. “You’re right.”

“Just keep doing what you’re doing and I’ll call you when I know anything further. I’m close to finding out who the sponsor is, and once I do,

then I will kill everyone around me to get home. But until then, you're in danger of Bam Bam taking you and dressing you up in his little outfits and keeping you locked up like a toy. You know he has a fascination with you."

I shiver as the memories rip down my spine. "Okay, but Eli, you could have told me earlier. I would have helped you."

"No, you wouldn't have..." He leans over and kisses my temple. "You would have left with him and I couldn't let you do that."

I stumble out of the car and push my dry hair out of my face, watching as the taillights disappear around the corner. Eli struck the deal with Dominic before he and Ky were together, so why did he do it? And what the fuck is Dove doing with Bam Bam? Even as the initial thought leaves my mind, I already know.

"Cartier!" One of the security guards at the gate climbs down from the watchtower, holding his AK across his chest. "What happened?" He brings his radio up to his mouth, but I stop him.

"Don't."

His eyes widen, but he lowers his radio slowly. "Ma'am, you can't walk in there like that, forgive me for saying."

"No, I know." I make my way to the gate as he swipes his key card to open it. "You're going to drive me to the Nero mansion, please." Kiznitch are way too good at keeping secrets. The workers and people who know about me have kept my secret for three years. Delila would be proud.

I slip into the passenger's seat of the G-Wagon with the word SECURITY stamped across the body of the vehicle. The trip to the lake house is a twenty-minute drive, and I take this time to go through my phone and missed calls, texts from Kyrin, Keaton, Kill, and then finally Nial. I don't bother answering them back because I know that once I tell them that I'm here, they'll come straight away.

I jump out and thank security, quickly slipping through the front door and climbing the steps up to the bedroom. The lake house is my favorite house in The Village. It offers three-sixty views of the forest and lake down below, and since it's facing west, you get to see the most amazing sunsets over the shrub-filled mountaintops. I remember the story my mom told us as kids, about the first couple from Kiznitch who found the land by stumbling upon it by accident. I don't remember the whole story, and now I wish I had paid closer attention. Since Kyrin and Lilith moved into the

manor with Luna, I've taken up the space here. Well, when I am here, but I've also decorated it to be mine.

I slip beneath the scalding hot water of the rainforest shower and squeeze soap into the palm of my hand, watching as the water around my feet turns to dirt. Four minutes. I'll give myself four minutes to enjoy a shower in peace before I call Jordan and Chris and get them here.

After scrubbing all evidence off my skin, I shuffle into some casual gray sweats and a tight white crop top with no bra. You can see my new nipple piercings through the fabric, and I pointedly make no effort at hiding them.

Tossing my towel onto my silk bed covers, I swipe up my phone and hit dial on Kyrin.

"Cartier, the next time you run, I'm chasing you."

"Chill out," I tease, heading down the stairs and into the kitchen. "I was gone for less than a day. Hey, so I'm coming on tour." Silence. There's shuffling around on his side before a door closes.

"We have already spoken about this, and what are you going to do?" My teeth clench as I fight with my answer. The one I want to give him just to throw it in his face, and the perfectly rehearsed answer that he will swallow easier.

"I'm not in the show, Kyrin, but I am coming." I pause, testing to see if he'll question my statement. "—I'll be taking Delila's RV."

He scoffs. "You might need to ride on over here and tell Persephone that you're taking it, because I'm pretty sure she has a few other girls in there."

I flip open a bottle of OJ and kick the door closed with my foot. "I'll be there in ten."

"The grass is damper than usual, don—" I hang up on him and push my phone between my boobs. Swiping up my discarded leather jacket, I slip it over my shoulders and shove my feet into my maroon Jordans. Way too good a shoe to be riding in, but I know Kyrin will be timing me.

Grabbing the keys off the table, I make my way outside, rolling the waistband of my sweats down a little before swinging my leg over my bike. She's been all sorts of colors, but the matte black and teal green have stayed for a couple of years now. Kicking out my leg, I start her up and squeeze the handle, revving the two-stroke engine loud enough for the birds in the trees to scatter.

Launching forward, I make my way to the main path. It's the center of The Village where we throw backyard parties and where the tent is usually

set up. Perse isn't going to make this easy for me, I know that. She has been a difficult personality to warm to, but she's with King, which means she's family.

Burning embers float through the dark night, lighting my path ahead, and I drop it down a gear and shoot forward, smiling widely when the wind whips through my hair and the loud bike rumbles between my thighs. The music becomes louder the closer I get, and the closer I get, the more faces I see turning toward me.

I slow my speed and stop directly near the fire. I seek out Kyrin to ask him for my time, only my eyes collide with Keaton. He's sitting on a log with a black hoodie pulled over his face and his legs spread wide. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his upper thighs. When he's angry, it's explosive. Like the warning earthquakes of a volcano that's about to erupt.

A curvy body dressed in a tight white dress blocks my view of him. My stomach turns to knots, but my aggression just wants to cut the knots into itty-bitty pieces. "Nine minutes fifteen. Not bad." Kyrin hooks his arm around my shoulder. I shuffle my jacket off, laying it over the handlebars of my bike.

"Yeah, well, what can I say?" I look away from Candi straddling Keaton's lap. "I'm angry. Where's my niece?"

"At home with Lil. Go see her. You don't need to be around this shit."

"Kyrin." I rest my hand on his chest, forcing his eyes down to mine. "I am not a child. I'm twenty years old. And guess what? I've also had sex. Like, *lots and lots* of sex. From different guys too...and this one girl, and —"

His hand is on my mouth, but my smile presses against his palm.

"Enough. Shut up. Perse is over near the bar. I won't fucking mention it again." He lowers his hand, shaking his head as he makes his way near Keaton. Probably to bitch about me. They're both so good at that. "Kill Me Slowly" from Sidekick plays loudly through the speakers, and I swoop up a half empty Solo cup, finding Perse sitting with Maya and Val. I don't see Sass with them, but she's probably with Lilith. Since Kill stamped his name over her forehead, she hardly does anything social.

"Hey! Can we talk?"

Perse stops her laughing with Maya. "Sure! You okay?"

Maya and Val shuffle to the other side of the fire, and I turn back around, lowering myself to the spot beside her.

“Yes, I’m coming on tour.” I watch for her reaction. The shock. The denial. But she nods simply. “I figured as much. It’s about time, truly.”

“Why aren’t you asking questions?” I ask, unable to hide my shock. Almost everyone would either warn me about Kyrin or ask questions. Like what would I be doing to contribute to Mayhem.

“Well, they’re not mine to ask.” She tucks her copper hair behind her ear.

“Well, shit. He sure trained you well, didn’t he...” There’s no surprise that King’s woman is complacent. He’s always liked the ones who don’t answer back. That’s probably my fault, since all I’ve done since I could talk was answer him back and ask questions.

“Well, no. I just choose my battles.” What the fuck did Delila see in her to think she was strong enough to handle this shit?

I pull away, my eyes finding Keaton before I can stop them. His tatted hands cover the curve of Candi’s ass, and I quickly snap back to Perse to get this conversation over with so I can go see Lilith. “I’m real sorry to do this to you at such short notice, but I need Delila’s RV.”

“Right.” Perse clicks her fingers together, bringing the rim of her cup to her lips. She takes a small sip, her lips rolling in to take the hit. “Because you’re the big CEO of Midnight Mayhem now, right? The Ice Queen...”

All thoughts of Keaton evaporate. “What?”

She rolls her eyes, taking another long sip. “Don’t bother trying to deny. I know everything.” She turns her head until we’re face-to-face. “Dove tells me everything, and by the way, I’m not telling anyone. King included.”

“Oh, right, so here’s the thing about your sister...” I lean into her so only she can hear me. “She’s a fucking traitor, and whatever game she’s playing is going to get her killed.”

Perse scoffs. “Cartier, you are a child who thinks you’re better than everyone else just because your last name is Nero and you have The Brothers to back you. You don’t know shit about pain or loss, so come back to me when you’ve unwrapped the bubble around your precious little head.”

Surprise wasn’t the first emotion I felt from her words. Not even anger. Just... disappointment.

“Oh, Persephone. How you don’t know shit about shit.” I stand from my spot and lean back into her, resting my hands on her knees. “And for the record...” I search her eyes. I don’t want to fight with her, and since this is our first one, it will be a test of our friendship in the long run. “You don’t

know anything about me. I don't know why you have decided to dislike me so strongly in such a short space of time, but just a reminder, you will not extend that hate to Lilith or my niece, or I *will* gut you open and hang your body parts as Christmas decorations on the Kiznitch tree." I straighten, eyeing her up and down. Her mouth hangs open slightly, her face paler than usual. "And I will be taking the RV, and Persephone, I'm the fucking boss around here, so the next time you want to open your trap, maybe make sure you also know how to close it."

I turn before she can answer, ignoring Keaton and Candi and shoving past King and Killian. Guilt starts to suffocate me, but I can't show weakness to anyone who knows my position or she will test me forever. I know Perse and I will eventually get over whatever it is that we feel about each other because I don't believe King's taste in women could be that bad, but for right now, I want to punch her. Right in the face.

"Hey! What was that about?" King asks, his hand on my upper arm.

I look between his grip and his eyes before shoving him off me. "*That* was what I needed to realize that Eli is wrong, and you're all about to find out just who the fuck I am now." I swing my leg over my bike and roar her to life, not bothering with my jacket and launching forward, making a direct line for the manor. The four families have their houses built in a Kiznitch triangle. Each of them obnoxiously big and in your face but all designed for the needs of every family. For me right now, I need to either burn, run, or fuck off some steam. Perse wasn't like this when she first came in, but it's like the longer she's here the worse she's becoming. I know it's not personal, that it has a lot to do with Dove and her bad drama, and now that I know her and Perse are a lot closer than I realized, it makes more sense as to why Perse is declining. Dove is poison.

I cut the engine of my bike and kick down the stand, jogging up the stairs to the Nero mansion. The porch light is on, and the stained glass on the front door shows movement through the foyer.

I push the door open and drop my keys on the gold plate near the coat hanger. "Hello! The favorite aunty is home!" The manor hasn't changed much over the years, so a lot of the furnishings are outdated, and whatever is new is what Ky and Lil would have put in.

"We're in here!" Lilith calls out from the family room. I remove my shoes, leaving them in the kitchen before opening the fridge. I'll need

something strong and hard to get through this tour if Keaton is going to be prancing around with his mundane plaything the whole time.

I pop off the cork to the bottle of Cristal and grab three flute glasses before heading down the old hallway. The walls bleed crimson, with stained wood paneling halfway down the wall, and family portraits of our ancestors hang proudly beside famous and, no doubt expensive, art.

The family room has floor-to-ceiling glass windows that overlook the bushland at the back. I could spend hours in here watching the trees sway with the wind.

“You read my mind!” Saskia gestures for the champagne like a child would a hug.

I place it on the coffee table, pouring our glasses. “Question, what the fuck is up with Perse, and why is she so bitchy lately?”

“It’s the motherhood thing,” Lilith says, leaning forward to take a glass.

“Speaking of...” I look around the dimly lit room before settling back on Lilith, who’s sitting on the sofa opposite the L lounge Sass and I are on. “Where’s my little L-Nox?”

“In bed!” Lilith breathes after taking a long sip. Her hair is in a relaxed bun on the top of her head, and she’s wearing comfortable sweats with oversized fuzzy socks. She looks great as a mother. “Where she needs to stay.”

I grin at my sister-in-law. Lilith came into our world like a tornado of mass destruction, and her casualties were my brother and Eli. Eli, who she still doesn’t know is alive. I feel terrible every time I lie to her, and I know that once she finds out, she and I are going to have problems. Loyalty isn’t black and white like they lead you to believe. There’s a gray area where people who you’ve not known long sit.

Lilith’s lilac eyes narrow in on me. “You will not wake her.”

“Yet! Keaton is prancing around his little plaything and I’m feeling... fragile.” Sass jumps in shock, and my mouth slams closed when I realize what I’ve done. I mean, Lilith isn’t a big deal. I’m guessing she knows, since she’s always grinning at me like a psycho any time Keaton is around me, but Sass is different. Fuck. I wasn’t supposed to say anything with her there, and now all of the training that I’ve done seems to slip between my fingers.

“I knew it!” Sass bursts out. “I knew you both had a thing for each other.”

I sit back in the plush fabric sofa, bringing the flute to my lips. “Saskia, that man has had his cock inside of me more than any other man. It’s a little more than a *thing*.”

Sass’ hand flies up to her mouth to stop her drink from bursting out. “What! Oh my God...”

Lilith snickers, and I look straight at her. “Kyrin can never know.”

Lilith raises her hands. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Shit,” Sass adds. “So right now he’s with... what’s her name?”

“Candi.” The taste isn’t so fucking sweet on my tongue.

“Candi—” Sass smiles widely, her bright teeth blinding me. “Oh... this is going to be fun.”



Ten

Past

Keaton

She sat at the end of the table and wore the brightest red coat that I had ever seen. I didn't have much to do with Delila, but we all knew what she was like. Bossy, demanding, conceited. It was why Maya hated her. They had no relationship, and everyone assumed it was because Delila was busy. Driven. They didn't know the real truth.

"Keaton? Do you understand what I'm saying?" Delila leaned back in her chair. I hated when she did that. Stared right through me like she could control my every move.

"I do." I squeezed the arms to my chair, tight enough for the veins to ripple up my forearm. "I fucking do."

"Good." She pushed up from the table. "This is what you are for, Keaton. Your father did it, and now you will too." My jaw tightened. Just as she was about to pass me, she rested her hand on my shoulder and leaned down to my ear. "Remember to use your pretty face to lure them in before you take them." I fought with myself to not launch up from the chair and wrap my hands around her neck. It wasn't because it angered me what I

needed to do; it was because any time she touched me, my skin burned so hot I wanted to tear it off.

The music was loud. Eminem rapping about girls shaking their ass seemed to match the flickering of bright purple neon lights that rimmed the outline of the floor. My phone wouldn't stop fucking vibrating, but I knew who it was and I wasn't in the mood for her right now. I'd been told I didn't have much humanity in me, but what I did have belonged to her. We both knew that, and Cartier played it like a fiddle. I couldn't answer the phone because I knew it would soften me.

I shuffled through the sea of people, pushing people out of the way. My fingers twisted with another's, and I spun her around until her tiny body crashed against my chest.

Eyes as sweet as honey blinked up at me, rimmed with dark lashes. "Oh..."

My hand came to her cheek and I glided my thumb over the hard edge of her jaw, the corner of my mouth curving upward in a wicked smile. When my eyes crashed back to hers, a goofy smile was plastered over her mouth.

Too fucking easy. Fuck that. How did parents raise daughters to do dumb shit like this? I'd be teaching my kid to cut any motherfucker who touched them without permission. Not that I was having children.

I ducked down to the side, gliding my lips over her ear as my eyes flew up and collided with Kohen, who was standing near the bar, watching us. Music thudded, lights flickered, and every now and then I'd see the strobe deepen Kohen's smirk.

"Let's get out of here..."

She melted against me like I was the one she was waiting for. Her knight in shining armor. Too bad for her, I was more like a hooded villain and it wasn't a sword I yielded, it was my demons.

She followed me down the long hallway, and I ignored the pounding tune of whatever song was thumping against the walls the deeper we walked. Kohen wouldn't be too far behind.

"My friends invited me to this bar. Do you know where we're going?" she asked loudly from behind. I ignored her. Desperate to get to the end of the hallway, I reached for the vertical bar that slid across to access the fire exit, pushing it open. A gust of wind flew between the cracks, and when I turned around, I could see her eyebrows fold in. Her pale arms were

wrapped around her small waist, and her little mini skirt gave an exact image of what it would look like without her wearing it. "Where we going?" Her blonde hair was short, cropped around her jaw, and her makeup was almost non-existent. She had to be sixteen. Maybe. If that.

"Home." I gave her something so she didn't scream.

"Yours?" Her shoulders weakened a little, that tightness around them slacking. This was barrier talk, and she fell right into it.

"Sure." I waved outside, and she took a second. Her eyes came to me, before going out the door. She couldn't see anything from where she was standing, since it was late out, but by the time she would have figured out what was going on, it would be too late.

She stepped up to me, and when she took the final step to pass me and walk outside, my hand came to her mouth and I pulled her against my chest.

Leaning down, I grinded my teeth down over her ear. "You can scream all you want when we get back. But for now, gonna have to gag you." Her legs flew back, colliding with my shin and she pressed up on her toes in an attempt to run from my grip.

I chuckled, directing her to the waiting SUV. The door swung open and I lifted her off the ground by the grip around her mouth, throwing her in and slamming the door once I was inside.

"What the fuck!" she screamed, the tires screeching as we pulled away from the trashy bar. "You could have just asked me!" Her eyes flew between Kohen and me. "And I'm all for a threesome too. You just had to ask." Her arms folded in front of her and she looked out the window.

I cocked my head, spreading my knees wide. "Fuck, you are desperate." Her cheeks pricked pink. "What?"

I leaned forward just as Kohen clucked his tongue. "You really think I want to fuck you?"

Her brown eyes were now a shade below black. They almost looked unreal. "What is this?" Her tone was a lot softer than it was seconds ago.

I grinned at her, pulling my hunting knife out of the holster around my jeans. "I'm about to hear you scream." She launched forward, her fist gaining speed toward my face, but Kohen caught it and shoved her back against the chair, his arm snaking around her throat to put her in a sleeper hold.

He stared up at me from behind smoky eyes. "We're not allowed to play with this one. This one is different."

I flicked my knife between my two fingers, studying him closely. Kohen was a lot of things, most of them deranged, but he did things by the book. He was loyal to Mayhem, and that was one thing people couldn't fault him on.

"Yeah," I murmured. "I am aware of who she is." I was the catcher. Kohen was just there to keep me on track so I didn't lose control.

"You'll have to find your fun elsewhere tonight, brother." Kohen's mouth curved into a wicked smile. "And I'll join you this time."

Present

Cartier's name flashes over my screen. Kyrin and Lilith are asleep upstairs after a long night of Luna, which is how I got to my current predicament. A chubby finger between my lips and bright blue eyes that could almost pass as violet like her mother's peer up at me from behind dark lashes.

"You wanna talk to your aunty?" I swipe my phone unlocked, bringing it to my ear. "She's kind of annoying," I say to Luna. "It's been three hours and you already can't get enough of me."

"I can plenty..." Her tone isn't the playful Cartier I'm used to, and I shuffle Luna under my arm to bring my phone to the other ear.

"What's wrong?"

She laughs, and again, it's not the kind I'm used to. It's cold and distant. "You don't have to worry about me, Keaton. You just worry about Lollipop."

My face falls and my eyes roll to the back of my head. "Shut up, Cartier. Why you callin'?" Her RV is directly in front of ours. After causing a storm with Perse, she got what she wanted. But then, Cartier always gets what she wants.

"Is Ky awake? He's not answering my calls."

I hang up on her and fling my phone across from me until it bounces off the cushion and falls onto the floor. I carry Luna upstairs until I hit Ky and Lilith's room, knocking on the door with my knuckle.

The door opens and Kyrin wipes the sleep from his eyes and rolls out of bed. He takes Luna off me and carries her on his hip. "What?"

"Cartier. Something is going on with her and I know you don't want to see it, but you need to trust me."

“Oh yeah?” Suddenly his eyes are wide and his shoulders are back. “And why is it that I need to trust you when it comes to my own sister?”

Kyrin and I have been dancing around this for years, since he first saw her and me fight, but neither of us has come clean, and I know in the back of my mind, he doesn’t know the extent to which she and I have gone. If he did, he sure as fuck wouldn’t be riding in this RV with me. “Ky, shut the fuck up and listen to me.”

He sighs, running his hand through his hair and turning his back on me for a second, placing Luna onto the bed beside Lilith before coming back.

He points down the stairs while shutting the door behind him. “Yeah, let’s talk.”

“You’re not gonna like what I have to say...” I tease the idea out loud, because Ky knows me. He knows what I do for fun, pleasure, and how I like to spend as little time as possible trying to get the truth out of someone. There are far more efficient ways of doing that.

He falls onto the sofa in the lounge, rubbing his hand over his stomach. “We’re not using our gifts on her. She’s way too smart, it won’t work. Plus —” He leans over the table to reach for my discarded phone. Lifting his brow, he tosses it to me and falls backward again. “She would just counter them and throw it back in our face. What do you think she’s hiding, though? Some love affair in Europe? She’s fucked Prince Harry behind Meghan’s back? We all know that’s as far as Cartier goes with secrets.”

I lean forward, resting my forearms on my thighs. I have this time with Kyrin to convince him because I know that as soon as she has him in front of her, she will fill his head with whatever lies she wants him to believe. “That’s what she wants us to think, but nah, man.” I lean back, stretching my arms wide. “There’s something more, and I’m going to get it out of her.” I bring my eyes to his. “The old school way.”

“Careful...” Kyrin murmurs, his lip curling up in a smirk. “You go uncovering all those stones and you and I both know you’re not going to always like what you find beneath.”

Past

I slammed the cell door closed and shoved the keys into my back pocket, watching as I passed each prisoner caged behind bars that they had no idea

what for. I often wondered why they might think they're here. Trafficking? Sex? Murder? All of the above if they didn't make the right decision.

Gripping the ski mask from beneath my jaw and tossing it onto the ground, I heard Kohen snicker from the sofa on the opposite side of the room. The Caves wasn't a place for people. Especially not those with humanity.

"You know you should be wearing those little neon masks like the rest do."

I flipped him off, pulling open the fridge and grabbing a beer. "Fuck no. None of those people are making it out alive, and if they do, they're in Midnight Mayhem, so what are they gonna do?" I wrapped my lips around the rim and took a swig of the bitter liquid. Every single one of those people behind the cage had Kiznitch blood but were from families who ran off from their obligation and tried to hide them. You didn't get a choice when you're Kiznitch. You either contributed or you died. There's no in-between.

"And Hadley?" Kohen clucked, his fingers tapping against his thigh as he pretended to watch whatever bullshit was on TV.

"She'll join, but she will have to change her name."

"Ahhh." Kohen turned, his smile wide enough to crack one thousand wrinkles into his premature face. "So she's different?"

I flicked my beer at him until it sloshed across his smug fucking face. "No, she's *important*." I smirked back at him. "There's a difference."

The walkie talkie sitting on the coffee table between Kohen and me crackled, and I reached for it, holding down the side button. "Yeah, what's up?"

"You have a problem in cell four. She's not wanting to budge."

My eyes closed as I pressed the button again. "I got it."

Slamming the walkie talkie back onto the coffee table, I yanked open the door as Kohen chuckled loudly from behind. "That's her, isn't it?"

Ignoring him, I shoved through the doors and made my way back down the long corridor. My boots slapped against the puddles on the ground until I reached the next door that opened out to the cells, swinging it wide open to the loud banshee screams of a woman. *Fuck!* I covered my ears with my palms and walked through the small puddles of watered-down blood near the drainage. The cells themselves weren't bad, but outside was built for murder.

Cell four.

Pulling out my keys, I jammed the right one into the lock and swung it open, launching straight for Hadley with a grip around her throat. I shoved her up against the wall with one hand, her head smacking and colliding with concrete, but instead of a cry, she laughed.

“Let me out of here, Keaton.” Her eyes searched mine, and I wanted to rip her head off for bringing weird shit to the surface inside of me. “Or have you forgotten who my daddy is?”

I hissed, moving my face to inhale her scent around her neck. “I know just who your daddy is, Princess, and that’s precisely why you’re staying right here.”

“I won’t join Midnight Mayhem...” Her eyes were wild. The kind you knew wolves chased. “Oh, but you will...”

Her head moved from side to side, her finger mirroring the motion. “Nope. I won’t.”

I tensed around her frail windpipe, looking between her mouth and her eyes. “Oh, but you will.”

“Or what!” she snapped, and the way her teeth sunk into her bottom lip had my brain short circuit, for reasons I wasn’t willing to touch. *Who the fuck is this girl and why the fuck is she staring at me like I’m her favorite monster?* Her lashes fanned over her cheeks. “Or you’ll cut me open like you do the rest of the people who don’t join your sick little cult?” The tip of her nose touched my jaw, and my body pushed into her before I could stop myself. “Tell me, Keaton, is it true what they say about you? That you do this for fun?”

Present

Time hovers below midnight. Sitting on my bike behind the stage, I watch as the aerial girls hush behind the closed curtain and Lilith strolls past, flicking her top hat over her silver hair. Midnight Mayhem began to lose its edge when Delila died, but lately, since there has been some movement in The Castle, it has started to feel like it did before. Before Persephone dropped the whole fucking ball. It almost feels like someone has taken over again. I just have to figure out who. It’s obviously no one here. You can’t do the things that are needed to be done and still perform in a show. Delila was the exception, and her sets were small.

I fire up my bike as Kill's pulsing KTM parks beside mine, leaning on one leg. "Bro, you are way the fuck out of it tonight." Tossing his lit cigarette onto the grass, he points at me with his finger. "You need to go out on a job before that crazy look in your eye turns into something none of us wanna see."

He's right. I run my palms down my thighs to wipe the sweat off, my finger tapping against my leg. "I'm fine."

Killian laughs, twisting the handlebar of his bike until it reds out. "No, brother, you ain't."



Elven

Cartier

Leaning against the customer entryway, I stare up at the high pointed ceilings. Four perfect upside-down V's pull up to the sky, where lilac and white stripes lead the way. Where the cage ends, trapeze planks hang over each side, awaiting the second to last final act. I've thought about moving the acts around more times than I know, but with The Dolls now riding with us and their siren water act, we don't have much room when it comes to times unless we extend the overall show. The bikes are now first with the four rings of death, and then the siren act.

Burning fuel and rubber suffocates me, and I close my eyes and inhale deeply, groaning when the smell touches the back of my throat. When the pulsing bike that stops beside me doesn't move, my eyes open lazily onto Keaton. He's shirtless and wearing nothing but destroyed denim jeans and biker boots. His clown face mask is hardly in place, smudged across his lips and beneath his eyes. I lose myself on the pulsing vein that swells against the side of his neck before finally drifting up to the bottomless depths of his eyes. My thighs clench together at the intensity of his gaze. He doesn't need to say a single word because I feel it. I feel it everywhere.

I raise my brows. "Where's your other toy?"

“Get on my bike.”

I tilt my head. I’m already in trouble, may as well make the most of it. My mouth curves in a smile but the butterflies in my belly roar as a warning. “Aw, Candi too sweet for you, hmmm?” I shift over and lean against his bike, my hand covering his as my legs part over his front wheel. I bring my lips almost to his, enough for us to touch without touching. “Forgot you preferred spicy over sweet?”

Awaiting his wrath, maybe a hand around my throat or buried in my hair to yank my head back, I count to five. Seconds pass before he smirks against my mouth. “Tigger, you’re getting on this bike whether you like it or not, but if I have to throw you on myself, you’re gonna be riding my dick all the way there and I don’t give a fuck who is watching.” His tongue slides over my bottom lip as a soft growl leaves his throat. “Your fucking brother included.”

“Fine!” I push off the bike, moving to the back. “But only because I’m bored.”

“Psshhh. Because you’d never turn down my dick, that’s why.”

“Yes, I would!” I hit his back with my fist while swinging my leg over the seat and sliding over the fender.

“Nah, the fuck you wouldn’t. Because I wouldn’t let you.” He roars forward so fast I almost don’t catch his waist.

Stopping outside the notorious matte black Brothers of Kiznitch bus, Keaton cuts the engine of his bike.

“No!” I lean around him to start it back up. “Not here. To my bus...”

When he starts to shuffle his big body off the bike, I reach for his hips, but he removes my hand. “Cartier, it’s here. I ain’t driving your ass all the way the fuck over there because you decided you wanted to be as far away from me as possible.”

I lean on one foot, running my hand down my thighs when he stares back at me. “You know it makes me nervous about Ky.”

He steps forward, and just when I think he’s going to reach for me, he moves his hand to the front of his crotch and grabs his dick from outside his jeans. “You coming in?”

My eye twitches, but I slowly swing my leg off the bike and close the distance between us. It’s not until I’m standing directly in front of him that I feel the heat roll off his body. Sexual tension between us is hypnotic. It’s like being lost in a mirror maze while being high on LSD.

Peering up at him from below, I press a finger against his pierced nipple. “Just this once.”

His arm is around my back as he lowers his lips to my head. “Mmhmm. You keep telling yourself that.” Laughter breaks out from where everyone is surrounding the fire pit and I jump back, out of his grip, only he doesn’t let me go. “They can’t see you here, Cartier. It’s just you and me.” I’m painfully aware how alone we are. My insides melt when I think about it too long.

My heart skips a beat and my throat swells. “How can you know that? Someone could be watching from the shadows.”

His finger is below my chin as he tilts my head up until my eyes are back on his. “Then let them fucking watch.” He kisses me, and it’s not until his tongue slides between my lips that I realize he’s also holding me up with that same arm because *goddammit*. I really missed him. His touch, his dominance, his kisses and reassurance. My knees give way the same way my damn legs do anytime he’s around. I don’t mind opening my legs for him; it’s my heart that I’m worried about.

I bring my hand up to the side of his neck, circling that angry vein with my thumb as he deepens the kiss. My pulse is pounding through my ears and the dampness between my thighs worsens as he backs me up until I slam into the bus. *I’m being a fucking Kiznitch slut right now*. Pushed up against The Brothers bus and getting licked down by the worst of them all. I’m in the enemy’s lane. Somewhere I promised I wouldn’t be, not just to myself, but also to Kyrin.

Shit.

I raise my hand to his chest to push him off me when he catches it with his and shoves it up over my head, using his other to lift me off the ground from around the back of my thigh. His hips buckle in to hold me in place when he breaks the kiss and rests his forehead against mine. The distant music travels between our bated breathing, but neither of us says a word. Sweat forms at the nape of my neck as I fight with myself to not grab him from below and force him inside of me.

He rolls his hips into me, and the friction grazes my clit with just enough pressure. My eyes roll to the back of my head as I lean against the bus. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t fuck you right here.”

“I can give you three...” I choke on my whisper when he rubs against me again, and I swear my skin is going to explode.

He leans into the side of my face and whispers in my ear, “Get inside, Cartier...” His hand travels down the apex of my belly, slipping beneath my jeans and flicking off the button. “Or don’t. Either works for me.” Releasing my wrist with his other hand, he grazes his finger over the side of my neck. Even through the clown makeup and the one wolf eye, his gaze burns mine.

He cups my pussy and I wheeze out a deep breath. “Keaton...”

“Mmm?” he teases, his lips a whisper over mine. He swipes his tongue over my bottom lip, flicking it inside and slowly twisting it with mine. “Change of plans.” Gripping the edge of my jeans, he tugs them down until they fall around my ankles.

“Keaton!” I screech quietly, searching around his big body. There’s no one here that I can see. Buses are lined all the way down to the back of the tent, each opposite each other, but everyone is at the after-party. *I hope.*

He drags his tongue over the inside of my thigh and I bury my hand into his thick hair. Warmth touches my clit as my knees buckle from beneath my weight. A song is playing—fuck—what song is playing? I can’t see or hear anything else, and suddenly I don’t care who walks around the corner and catches us. I push my hips forward, riding his mouth as his other hand reaches behind me and he squeezes my ass cheek. My heart rate picks up and my lower belly explodes with electricity as he slides his tongue inside me and I release around him, my body jerking with every pulse.

He stands slowly, swiping his bottom lip with his thumb and sucking me off. “Get inside. I’m not done with you.”

I slide my jeans off my feet and kick them to the side, batting my lashes at him as I pass. “Let’s see how much you really don’t care if Kyrin finds out, hmm?” My hand is on the door handle and a smirk on my mouth. “Leave them there.”

Keaton laughs, flashing his straight teeth. God. Why make evil so beautiful?

He closes the distance between us, reaches for the handle over my hand, and yanks it open. My back is pressed against his hard chest when he leans down to the curve of my ear. “You wanna play that game? Baby...” His teeth scrape over the curve of my shoulder. “I’ve been waiting for this day since I had my dick in you.” He pushes against my ass with a thrust of his hips. “Inside.”

I move through the doorway and head straight for the stairs. Their bus is exactly what you would expect from them. Decked out in black marble, polished timber, and worn leather, it's everything a bachelor pad would look like. I'm not at all surprised by the fact that Lilith and Luna stay here, though. Lilith isn't exactly a conventional mother—not that any Kiznitch mother is.

Passing Kyrin's door, I wince before shoving open Keaton's and pause once I'm inside, seeing Candi on the sofa near the small bay window that pops out. Keaton's room is clean, but messy. He's always had this uncanny ability to somehow keep the balance between the two. I blame it on the fact that he's a Scorpio, but maybe it's just because he's always had a thing for balance.

"Huh." I tilt my head, scanning her body. She's wearing a short leather skirt and crop top. Dressed like a true Kiznitch Puppy. They usually hang with the setup crew and they're usually daughters of the crew.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Keaton slams his door closed and I slowly unzip the front of my top. I'm already bottom naked, and if I stay like this, it feels awkward. There's power in nudity if you're a woman.

"I didn't know she was going to be here—I'll leave!" Candi stands from the seat.

"Yeah, you fucking will." Just as she is about to pass him, his hand flies out and squeezes her cheek. "Next time you come up in here without my permission, I'll kill you. Understand?" Her blue eyes flash with fear, wrinkles crinkling on her forehead from her shock.

I roll my eyes and kick off my Jordans, reaching for her hand. "Don't listen to him." I bat my lashes up at Keaton before slowly sucking Candi's finger into my mouth.

Keaton's eyes narrow the same time he grabs me from around my wrist, yanking me out of her grip. A loud laugh ripples out of me. Keaton points to the door and glares at Candi. "Get the fuck out now."

In his wrath, I dance my way to his bed and drop down onto the end. Poor Candi stammers out with her tail between her legs.

Keaton stares back down at me from the other side of the room. "Oh, you think that's funny?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I do actually."

"And why's that?" He takes a calculated step forward. My smile remains, but I'm painfully aware of the dangerous ground I'm treading on.

Keaton doesn't give warnings, he exists, and you have to figure out whether he's about to fuck you or kill you.

"I think it's funny when you lose your grip on control, Keaton." I lean forward, my hands on the bed. "You expected me to be jealous that she was here. You didn't expect me to want to fuck her in front of you."

"I won't share you, Cartier..." He takes the final step, his knees touching mine.

I peer up at him, licking my lips. "That's cute, Keaton, but that's not how this works. I don't sit back and watch you fuck her and then not get any—"

His hand is around my jaw. "I. Won't. Share. You."

I clench my teeth together, fire burning beneath my flesh. He has never been this possessive, at least not this obvious about it. The Brothers are all supposed to be into sharing, but right now, it's looking like the end of a generational *curse*. "I don't give a fuck. If you put your dick in someone else, guess what? One's coming inside me too."

He tenses, his lips curling upward as he bares his teeth. I know he's hanging by a thread of patience right now, but I also know he wouldn't harm a hair on my head. My tongue rests on my upper lip to hide my grin. "You—"

"—I won't."

His grip loosens enough for me to open my mouth farther. "Won't what?" Confusion warps my mind, but I don't have time to figure anything else out because right now, his eyes are on mine and his mouth is slightly parted, as if he's concentrating hard on what to say next.

"I won't fuck, kiss, touch anyone that isn't you."

I search his features, bringing my hand to his chest. My finger hovers over the tattoo on his hip, the casket with a cherry carved into the wood. "Please don't say that."

He leans down, hands resting on either side of my body. "I don't fucking say it lightly, but I mean it."

"Keaton, I—"

He stands straight again, his thumb sliding between the cushion of my lips. "Bite."

I wrap them around and flick my tongue over the base.

He hisses. "Good. Now spread your legs and play with your pussy, but remember I fucking own it."

He falls backward as I slide up the bed, squeezing my nipples. Lying down on his pillows, I slip over the black silk and close my eyes, inhaling the smell of his scent. Sexual masculinity. It's intoxicating. *He is fucking intoxicating.*

Music starts playing. Not too loud, but enough to hear. And then the lights are off and all that's illuminated are the LEDs that surround his king size bed and the outline of the floor and TV. I'm locked and caged in his bedroom, the very one I used to sneak into growing up. Keaton has never been involved with any girl. He'd mess around, sure, but none of us have ever seen him with any one person seriously.

Candi doesn't count.

"What do you want from me, Cartier?" His voice is baritone, but sensual. As if he has smoked one thousand cigarettes and burned the back of his throat. He hasn't. We all know he hates smoking. "Answer."

My head shifts to the side, peering up to where he stands beside the bed with the button of his jeans undone. His body is art, but not the kind you stare at to admire. It's the kind that you sell because you think it's cursed.

I lick my bottom lip before my teeth sink into it. His eyes follow the movement as his cheeks redden.

"Cartier..." he warns. "You're testing my patience. Answer me."

"I want you to do whatever you want to me..." I move my hand down my stomach, my thumb tracing the line that dips below my belly button before it stops right on top of my Kiznitch star that's inked below it.

His eyes narrow. "You should be punished for tonight."

My mouth curves slightly. "I know."

Leaning down, he sinks his fist into the mattress beside my head as he runs the tip of his nose over the bridge of mine. "I should fuck Candi in front of you." The whisper of his words slaps me across the face. Undiluted jealousy rages like a wild eagle deep in my belly. I'd kill him for sure... but... when the rage disappears, intrigue takes its place. Would the excitement turn me on? Or is it just the probability of me strangling him after he's done it that will?

There's no way I could handle that. I'm entirely full of shit. "Do it."

He rears his head back as if I've slapped him across the face before standing up straight. Seconds pass between us, like a silent battle of who is more stubborn than the other. I know he would. There's no doubt about it at

all that Keaton would fuck her right in front of me just to make his point. *Why do I like to test him?*

He snickers, falling backward while pulling open the drawer in his bedside table and removing a black satin box. He momentarily stares up at me before going back to the box as his finger runs across the edges. “Know what this is?”

The song changes to “Savages” by Kerli. I shake my head slowly, my finger grazing my clit.

He holds my stare, flicking open the lid. “Good answer.” He places the box on his bedside table and removes the belt around his jeans. I wait for him to drop it, but he brings it to my head.

“Lift.” I tense my abs as he slides the belt beneath my head, sitting it around the base and tightening it around my eyes. Lights out, all dark. My breathing deepens, my chest lifting off the bed. His lips touch my cheek. “You’re going to wish I fucked her instead.”

Doubt it.

The music becomes louder. As if I can hear every word she’s singing, every strum of the beat. Keaton and I have always been free with the bedroom activities, but I’ve never had him blindfold me. And I’ve never had anyone blindfold me with their belt. The distant notes of worn leather tantalize my senses. I just want him inside me.

“Keaton.” I stifle a moan. “Please just fuck me.” I press my thumb against my clit, circling it harder, but he whacks my hand away and rope touches my wrist on that hand, and then my other. Panic squeezes my body like a hug I didn’t ask for. *Cold. Damp.*

“Cartier?” I hear Keaton come back in. “I said, do you want out?”

“What?” I breathe, resting my hand against my sweaty chest. “No? What happened?”

“You left me for a second. I can take shit away—”

“—no!” I give him back my wrist. “Do it.”

“Sure?” he whispers, and it’s not the same tone he used for me moments before. This is the Keaton I know all the time, not the one in the bedroom. The one I *want*. No. *Need*. Right now.

“Yes, fuck.”

The other loop links around my other wrist and he pulls back, latching my hands to the anchors at the top of his bed. My cheeks burn from excitement. It’s intoxicating being around him like this. Existing with him

in this moment. Right now, I'm not Cartier Nero, the new CEO of Midnight Mayhem Enterprises. Right now, I'm simply Cartier.

My laughing stops when something cold touches my thigh. It's not hard, it's something else. A material. *Leather*.

Flipping me over from my hips, I land on my tummy and squeeze the ropes on each wrist as he runs the tip of the *what the fuck is this?* Whatever it is, over the swell of my ass cheek.

Sharp pain bites over my cheek and I hiss through the pain when his hand replaces the sting with a gentle caress.

Lifting me from my hips, he raises my ass in the air as another sting pelts on my other ass cheek. "So fucking pink and pretty, baby." I swallow his words and rub my ass against him. "My perfect little slut."

I collapse onto the bed, my ass still in the air as dampness pools between my thighs. Warmth covers over my entrance and I moan into the sheets. "Keaton, please. I need you..."

"You need me? Hmmm? His mouth is replaced, and his fingers, as another sting of the leather crop whips over my ass cheek. Cries leave me as throbbing pain smudges into a deep pull in my belly. He rubs the tip of his cock over my entrance, slamming inside of me roughly. I throw my head back and a loud scream erupts from between my lips, my veins in my neck straining. He continues to drive into me, sweat dropping over my spine as the straps around my wrist rub.

His tongue comes to the base of my spine and he drags it all the way up until his teeth snap down on the flesh behind my neck. "Gonna break you until you beg me to stop."

My head shakes from side to side. "I'm never going to tell you to stop." His cock thrusts against my walls, every second pushing me higher and higher. I feel my stomach clench, fisting the build of pleasure in my abdomen with an iron fist before Keaton's fingers pinch into my hips harder and he slams into me one more time before I combust, like an over-inflated balloon I burst around him in an array of colors. My body jerks as I come down from my orgasm, but before I can catch my breath, he's spinning me back around, slamming me onto my back and squeezing my thigh before diving back inside of me.

His hand is on my throat as he uses his grip to meet his deep thrusts. "Look at me, Cartier."

My eyes slowly peel open, my head spinning from the comedown.

“You wanna be a good girl for me?”

I nod, but it’s hard to move because of his grip. He slides his thumb into my mouth, the corner of his mouth curving upward. “Ride me.”

We switch around and he slides beneath me, reaching up to unlatch the holds on my wrists. As soon as they’re released, my hands slam onto either side of his head and I roll my hips over him. I watch as his mouth forms a little O when I grind over his cock and clench around him tightly when I rise up. Falling back down, he tilts his head back as his eyes roll to the back and the veins that spiderweb over his throat swell against his tattoos.

His teeth sink into his bottom lip. “Fuck—” Raising his hips up to meet mine, he quickens his pace as I rest my hand on his torso and feel that familiar heat build between my thighs.

“Keaton, I’m—” I explode around him again as his cock throbs inside of me. Falling onto his chest, I suck in deep breaths, my hair sticking to his sweaty chest.

His arm curls around, flipping me to the side as my eyes drift closed. I sigh, running my finger over the lines of the demon on his chest.

“Your first.”

“Mmmm,” he answers, his voice drenched with fatigue. “One of seventy-three.”

“Keaton.” My finger pauses, unwilling to go to the next one. “Did you mean it when you said you wouldn’t sleep with anyone else?” I don’t know why I’m talking.

He shifts a little, wrapping his other arm around me and pulling me farther into his chest, kissing me gently on the top of my head. “Cartier, you’re the only person I’ve ever thought about when I’ve fucked anyone else. Choosing to only put my dick inside you has been the easiest decision of my life.”

I press my lips against his damp chest. “This can’t go as far as we want it to.”

He swallows. “I know. Why do you think my kills are so high?”



Twelve

Keaton

Past

“She still fighting it?” Killian asked when I came through the next day. If it wasn’t Kohen, it was Killian who was here. Figured.

“Yeah.” I fell down onto the single leather sofa in front of the burning fireplace. The Castle was the technical “home” of Delila while she was the Midnight Mayhem CEO. It was the home of the previous one before her and so on. Before we migrated to the United States, we also had a similar setup in Kiznitch. I’d been to it once or twice. I preferred that one to this one. The Castle in Kiznitch was an actual castle, unlike this, technically speaking, modernized structure.

“She’ll open up soon enough. She has to.”

I shook my head, my knee bouncing in the spot. “I don’t know, man. She’s for sure fucking headstrong for a girl of her age, and she keeps going off about her daddy.” I reached for the packet of cigarettes on the coffee table and placed one between my teeth. I lit the tip.

“How old is she?” Kill asked, and my eyes flew up to his as I blew a cloud of smoke out, resting back against the chair.

“Why?”

His beady eyes curved, his smirk telling all. "Well, I was just thinking, you know, you said daddy, and I'm thinkin'..."

"And you're thinking you want me to fuck her like one until she breaks?" I flicked the ash off the tip and glared at him. "Not interested."

"Why not? She's hot."

"She's fucking underage, and by the way, I ain't into children."

He leaned forward. His arms were beginning to lean out since he started hitting the gym with me. "So are we."

"Killian," I scolded him like I would a toddler trying to make a run for it into a candy store. "No."

His bottom lip dropped as he flew back against his chair. "Well, how else are you going to get her to spill about her daddy?"

My eyes squinted around the sting of smoke. "I have one or two ideas. None of which includes stat rape, you fucking mutt."

"Hey!" Kill's arms flew up in defense. "Damn, I didn't say anything about rape. Chill. Thought you didn't have a heart."

"I kill people, not rape them." I stubbed out my cigarette, picking up the box of smokes and making my way to where the foyer met the family room.

"Can I watch?"

I didn't bother answering when I headed down the long, cold corridor and stopped outside the floor-to-ceiling white polished doors that opened up to Delila's office. Before I could walk straight past them without looking back, they swung open and Delila stood with white slacks and a silk black blouse open slightly to expose her chest.

"My favorite pet." Her eyes fell to my boots before crawling back to my face. And I mean crawl, since she did it every single fucking time she saw me. It got worse with age, and I was painfully aware with how open sex was within our culture, but I wasn't Killian. I wasn't interested in fucking The Mothers. Except Killian's...

Unfortunately, Delila had other plans. Like usual. And from a far... younger age.

Her fingers hooked in mine, yanking me into her office.

I gritted my teeth closed. "I've got shit to do, Delila."

"Awww... what?" She pulled me back against the desk, sliding up and spreading her legs wide while unzipping my hoodie slowly. "You know I want to play." She leaned closer until her warm breath touched the side of my cheek. My stomach rolled. "And you know you can't say no."

Present

Loving someone is allowing them to give themselves to you. It's a promise that you're not going to break them. That's not something I can afford to offer.

Ever.

Yet any fucking time Cartier is near me, my dick is hard, and my mouth is saying dumb ass shit. Her brother I can take. Her wrath, on the other hand, I cannot.

We're almost at our next destination, and all I can think about is the previous fucking night with her. The sex is always good. She doesn't just ride my dick, she takes my mind too.

Kyrin's heavy footsteps distract me from my Instagram stalking and I stare up at him as he rounds the sofa, flashing his phone in front of my face. Cartier thinks I'm joking when I leave shit out in the open for Kyrin to see. I'm not. I want him to know.

"What?" I ask, leaning forward to get a closer look. Cartier's name is on the top of the message, and the corner of my mouth curves up in a grin. *Or maybe she does.*

"Why the fuck you smirking, Keat?" Throwing his phone onto the sofa, he flops down beside it. "This isn't funny. Why did I hear this from her and not from Perse? What the fuck is happening?"

"What do you mean?" So it isn't what I think it is, but something is happening. I widen my legs and rest my phone on top of my thigh, my other holding my protein shake.

"Motherfucker, did you not read that? It said that we're flying out of LAX." He pins me with a stare, his eyes flickering. "This has turned into an international itinerary and I heard this from my *sister*."

I pause. All train of thought dies out as my leg slows its jiggling. "Hold up."

Seconds pass.

One.

Two.

Three.

Her taking Delila's bus to her in Kiznitch for the recruit.

I shoot up from the chair. “She’s fucking CEO.” And I, of all people, know what happens and what that position entails, which means... my blood turns cold.

“I don’t know for sure and I’m guessing her slipup is on purpose. Like she wants us to figure it out without her telling us.”

“Shit...” I make my way into the kitchen and dump my shake into the sink. I could do with a shot of vodka right now, and I don’t even fucking drink often, let alone at this time of day. “That doesn’t make sense...”

“Nah, brother... it really doesn’t and I’m fucking done with her being a step in front of us.”

“Well, she’s not,” I remind him simply, and it doesn’t take him long to catch on to my words.

He winces. “Don’t start.”

Pushing off the counter, I make my way back to the lounge. “What do you want to do about this? Play it out?”

Kyrin’s face hardens. “Yeah. Let’s see what she’s got.”

I don’t question him, mainly because I know Ky wouldn’t let anything get too far with her, so I feel safe enough to fuck around with it, but also because I know at least if I’m in the game, I can control it too.

And what a game it will be.



Thirteen

Cartier

I pat Jordan on the shoulder as he parks my bus. “Thank you for staying so low-key through this. I know it can’t be easy for you.”

He turns slightly over his shoulder, shifting the gear into park and spinning around to face me. “It isn’t, but I understand why you’re doing it.”

Christopher clears his throat in the passenger seat. “I don’t mean to overstep, but did they not ask who was driving you?”

I shake my head, moving back the same way I came to grab my already packed bags—or should I say never unpacked bags. “No. There’s so much crew they wouldn’t think to ask.”

Jordan follows closely, dressed in comfortable clothes instead of his suit. “You know since we’re all going on this plane, it’s going to be more difficult to keep this from them?”

I toss my handbag over my shoulder, patting his chest. “I’m guessing that right about now... they’ve figured out who I am.”

Jordan’s face pales. “Cartier...”

Smiling up at him softly, I straighten his hoodie. “It’s what needs to happen. I’m going to need their help with Eli since I don’t know how else I can help him, and I don’t trust Dove.”

Jordan's eyes flick to Christopher before coming back to me. "Cartier —" There's a bang on the door and I shove my phone into my back pocket.

The afternoon sun slaps me across the face when I see Lilith standing at the bottom of my steps holding Luna.

I smile down at both of them, lifting Luna's heavy little body into my arms and resting her on my hip. "Good morning to my most favorite person!"

Luna's little hand reaches out and twists with my hair as Lilith leans to the side, catching Jordan and Christopher picking up our bags. "Oh, okay..."

I kiss Luna on the head. "It's not that."

"You don't need to tell me anything. I'm just coming to get you since your brother is acting like a psycho again and asking for you to sit near us on the plane."

"Ah, I can't. I've got these two with me, but!" I turn to face Luna, rubbing my nose against hers. "I will be stealing you."

She giggles and her little chest shakes as her sweet voice fills my ears and calms my panic. *Everything is going to be fine. You were trusted with this position, which means they trust you will make the right choice.*

"Hey," Lilith interrupts, and I follow the steps down to her. "Is everything okay? You know you can talk to me, right? About anything. What we found out was deep, and I don't know if you've been talking to anyone about it or not, but just know I'm here. I won't go snitching to Ky either. Please. He's going to break me if I give him any more ammunition for angry sex."

Luna reaches up behind my neck and pulls me in deeper, resting her little head on my shoulder. A lump forms in my throat when her breathing evens out against my neck.

"I know." I trust Lilith completely, more than I trust anyone else here—including The Brothers, because with them, I know their loyalty always lies with one another. It has always been like that and always will be like that. "We can talk when we land in Prague."

"Speaking of..." Lilith's eyes move behind me as Christopher and Jordan close the bus door, bags in hand. "What are we doing in Prague?"

I tap the tip of my nose, massaging the back of Luna's dark hair with my thumb. "Let's go before Kyrin starts throwing shit around."

We make our way onto the tarmac, where the large 747 is lit up from the inside out. The words *Midnight Mayhem* are stamped into cursive lettering, with *Nero Enterprise Holdings* below it. They've done a few international tours, but this is my first one, since I've always been put in the corner like a delicate doll.

The Brothers are waiting at the steps with security and a couple of flight attendants dressed in the black *Midnight Mayhem* attire. They're hired, as is the pilot, but they wear our uniforms when we have them booked.

I pointedly ignore Keaton. After last night, I don't know how I feel about the rabbit hole we're both constantly fucking each other into. It's like a riptide that doesn't release you and continues to drag you out to sea.

"Is everyone already in?" The question is pointed at any one of them, but it's King who answers.

"Yeah, but who the fuck are these two?" He points to Christopher and Jordan.

Lilith interrupts. "Ah, they're her bodyguards? The fuck do you think they are? Her boyfriends?" Her face falls and pain flashes across her face.

"Hey." I reach for her arm, but she jerks, looking up at me. There are slight dark circles around her eyes, and her shoulders seem deflated as though she just remembered. "It's okay."

I pass Luna to her carefully without waking her, and wait until Lilith is in the plane before I turn toward my impossibly frustrating brothers. Kyrin looks smug, with a smile hiding behind his teeth, and King has an eyebrow raised, knowing my answer before I've even said it, but it's Keaton that tips me over the edge. His dead, unfazed look as he looks distantly over my shoulder.

Not bothered.

I step backward, between Christopher and Jordan, flashing a smirk between all of them but mainly on Keaton. "They were my playthings." Shuffling between Keaton and Ky, I pat both their chests before batting my lashes up at Keaton. His dark gaze rumbles down on me like a crack of thunder.

The corner of my lip curls in a smirk. "Be nice to them." I look to Ky. "Or don't." Before going back to Keaton. "We all know I like playing with broken toys..." I shove through them and head up the steps into the cabin doors. My throat tightens as I make my way through the plane. The guilt is almost suffocating, especially after last night, but right now I have other

things I have to think about that will definitely cost me Keaton. At least for a while.

“Afternoon, Miss Nero.” One of the flight attendants bows her head at me as I pass. She’s pretty. Blonde, leggy, and has that look about her that most men want to fuck.

“Afternoon—” I look at her name tag, “—Amelia.”

She flashes her wide smile. “Do you need some help to your seat?”

“I’m okay, thank you.” I pass through the front section of the plane. There’s an upstairs and downstairs, but we use upstairs for the beds and bathrooms. Everyone sits where they like, there’s no method to it, but I always prefer the back of the plane, even as a kid when I’d be allowed to ride for the flight.

“Hey, everyone!” I call out, and the talking quiets and faces turn to me. Most of them look confused, but the rest of them don’t seem to think about anything at all, judging by the drinks already on their laps. “We are flying to Prague, like I mentioned in the email you obviously all received. We touch down there and our first show isn’t for two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” someone near the front asks. I bring my eyes to her and see it’s one of the Angels from the Angel and Demon slot. I can’t remember her name. *Oh my God, did Delila remember everyone’s names?*

“Yes, two weeks. That gives everyone enough time to chill out, train, get over their jetlag, warm up, and our equipment to get there.” I’m waiting for someone to ask why I’m the one announcing, but when none of them do and I close off what I have to say, I carry on to the back of the plane. There are four sections in the very back that are formed with booths and another access stairway to upstairs. The bar is near the back. Maybe that’s why everyone likes sitting down here.

I choose a faraway booth, dumping my handbag on the chair while moving my pillow and blanket for the flight to slide in. I can see The Brothers shuffling in behind Jordan and Christopher, but I refuse to look up at them. They intimidate a lot of people, or should I say everyone, but not me. When you’ve been raised by monsters, they teach you how to exist with them. They don’t scare me. To an unnatural level, they don’t scare me.

Jordan chooses the chair opposite me, with Christopher beside him. The booths are large enough to fit four on each side, but they’re giving me my space. Something they’ve always been good at and what has made it so much easier to tolerate them for so long.

“This plan you’re working on,” Jordan whispers low, leaning over the table as I twist off the lid to my water bottle. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

I ignore him for a few seconds, painfully aware of the heat that’s coming from the other side of the plane. They’re in direct view of me for a reason, and suddenly, all of that confidence in them falters for a second. I know they wouldn’t hurt me, but I also know that I’ve just made it aware that I’ve been keeping a secret from them.

“It’ll be fine.” I pull my phone out of my pocket and slide it into airplane mode but flick Wi-Fi on to connect to the internet. I wait until we’ve taken off and up in the air when I open a new iMessage.

Me: Are you okay?

Eli: You know you shouldn’t message me. I’m fine.

My heart sinks and I lean back against my chair, closing my eyes. I don’t know what he’s done, but I know that somehow, it has to do with me.



The earthy scenery of Prague has my mind spinning a web of homesickness. It reminds me of The Castle in Kiznitch. Building after building of towering rooftops and ancient stained-glass windows. Jordan drives us to the hotel where we are all staying, and I answer my phone when Kaius’ name flashes over my screen. I’ve been thankful in a way that The Fathers haven’t dabbled much in how I run Midnight Mayhem, but I’m not naive to think they very much still call the shots.

My eyes meet Jordan’s in the rearview mirror as I swipe my phone unlocked. “Hello.”

“Cartier...” he answers lightly. “You’ve touched down in Prague?”

I cross my leg on top of the other, playing with the rings on my finger. “Yes. When will you be here?”

“We will be landing soon and staying in the Hall of Residence in the countryside. I will send you the address and I want you to gather the list I sent you of who are to attend.”

“Kaius, we have a problem.”

There's a second pause. "They know?"

I've thought about this moment for years and how I would break it to The Fathers after I'd spilled the beans. "Yes, they do."

"That's not ideal for right now, but have they tried to interfere?"

I lean farther back against the chair, watching trees pass. "That's the strange thing. No, they haven't. The entire flight they left me alone." I'd rather their anger than their silence. I was prepared for their wrath—hell, I'm familiar with it. But their silence is unfamiliar ground for me, and it makes me uncomfortable.

"Hmm," he mumbles, and then pauses. "The Mothers will be there with us too. Gather who I send you and we will meet you all tomorrow night." I hang up the phone as the car pulls into the entry to the hotel. The Kiznitch meetups are something I've known about since I was a child, but I was never allowed to be around them.

Until now.

But there's something off with The Brothers, and I know that whatever they're planning to do, I need to be another step ahead. Yet again. When did my life become a constant stepping contest?

My door opens and I slide out, smirking up at Christopher when he nods down at me. It helps that both of my arm men are hot. Christopher with his long blond hair tied at the nape of his neck and bright blue eyes, and Jordan with his olive skin and green eyes. They're a complete contrast to one another but somehow fit both sides of me. They're here for me to use as I please, as Delila had her own, but I won't. I won't sleep with them to make them feel that's all they're good for.

Keaton doesn't have to know that, though.

Christopher leaves us to get the keys for our room, and I hook my arm with Jordan as he leads us through the main lobby. It's an older style hotel, with concrete walls and cracked tiles lining the floor, but even at the surface you can see that it's big money. The gold and black décor, and Gothic style chandelier that hangs from the center is my favorite, though. I need one. Jordan leans down, his thumb catching my bottom lip. "Your lip gloss is over lined."

"I—" An arm is around my waist, yanking me into a hard chest, and when I turn around to slap whoever it is, I pause when I'm looking up into familiar dark eyes. People around us seem oblivious to the caveman in front of me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I whisper to him, pushing off his chest. I click my fingers at his eye level when he doesn’t look away from Jordan. “Keaton!” I don’t want to look around his body to see where Kyrin is because I know he’s there. Watching. *Now knowing that something is going on between us.*

“Yeah, you’re staying with me...” Finally, his eyes fall down to mine. He raises his brows. “You gonna fight it? Because I’m game to fight it. Right here and now.”

“Fine!” I snap at him, yanking myself out of his grip and turning back to face Jordan. “Take the bags up to my room, please. I’ll call you if I need you.”

I wait until Jordan has left with Christopher until I finally turn back around. “He was fixing my lip gloss.”

“Yeah? He fixes it, and I fuck it up.” I follow him as we make our way to where Kyrin, Lilith, Luna, Sass, and Kill are standing near the elevators.

Great.

Keaton is talking with Kill when I finally look up at my brother.

His eyes are narrowed down on me. “You know what’s fucking hilarious?” *Here we go...*

“Okay—” Lilith passes Luna to Sass. “I’ll be up soon. Can you let King know he might want to come down here...”

“No?” I tilt my head and fold my arms in front of me. I already know the words are coming. I broke that promise with him, with my most favorite person ever, but right now, I don’t have time to feel guilty because I’m pretty sure he’s about to explode.

Kyrin’s head moves between Keaton and me. Keaton stops his talking, but his mouth moves into a grin. *Motherfucker.*

Kyrin points between us. “What the fuck was that?” He turns fully to Keaton, stepping in front of me and blocking my view.

“Ky.” I reach for his arm, but he moves away from my touch.

“Which one of you is speaking up first?”

Lilith takes my hand with hers, pulling me out from behind Kyrin and glaring up at him from behind wild silver hair. “How have you not known? Honestly, Kyrin.”

Kyrin turns his wrath to her, and panic grips my gut as I turn around to see who all is in the lobby. Thankfully, it’s just us and the workers behind reception, who seem to be ignoring the fact that they can hear us.

Kyrin's lip curls. "What?"

Lilith's fingers intertwine with mine, pulling me closer to her. Kyrin's eyes fall to the connection before settling on her. His brows raise slightly. "You think that's going to keep her safe like I won't fucking lock you both in a basement and drip feed you through an IV for months on end." His fingers wrap around Lilith's chin, forcing her head up to his. "What. The fuck. Do you mean? You knew?"

My mind spins in circles and every time Kyrin has lost his shit at me plays on repeat. I close my eyes to calm my erratic heart. My airways cave in and I struggle to inhale...

"Just fucking do it. Now! Do it." It was warm and sticky. There was a fireplace burning rapidly on the other side of the room and a television playing in the background. Why was Chuck Norris still trying to sell that weird fucking workout machine? He lost all his street cred doing that.

"Now! Or she's going to wake, and when she does, we have to have her back where we took her from." The voices I didn't recognize. Aside from Chuck Norris.

"I don't think it's a good idea to meddle this much. She's Kiznitch! She'll know."

"She won't!" the girl snapped, and I felt dampness around my upper arm. I tried to lift my other to touch whatever it was, but it wouldn't move. Numbness swam through my body. I could have been burning over a pitchfork and I wouldn't have known.

The pain was gone.

The thoughts—stopped.

It was nice.

Until...

"I told you to fucking leave her out of this!" That was a voice I recognized.

I tried to force my mouth open, desperate to scream the name I'd said so many times before.

"This is all about her, Eli!"

"Yeah, I'm aware, and that is why you have me here because I said I would help you. You didn't need her too."

"Well, we need a plan B!" the girl, who I'd decided I hated, replied with a smugness in her tone.

“You don’t think I fucking have one of those too?” Eli growled, and my heart split open slightly from hearing him so close. My best friend. The first person I met and wanted to be with that wasn’t Keaton.

“Get your plan moving faster, Eli, or these little sessions won’t stop...”

A finger hooks around my pinkie and I’m being tugged backward, my eyes flying open and out of my dream. I collide against Keaton’s chest and grapple the outline of his hoodie, swiping my tears off my face with the material.

“Hey!” Keaton squeezes me in his arms, and I suck in another deep breath when I feel his heartbeat against my cheek. “You’re here with us. You’re safe.” Even though his arms are around me and his words are like balm over a burn, it doesn’t subside the panic. What was that? A dream? A flashback? It can’t be. I don’t recognize those memories at all.

Oh my God, Kyrin.

I turn back around to see Kyrin’s eyes searching mine. His brows are downward in worry, and his mouth flat. “What happened? What’d you see?” God, we’re all a bunch of fucking weirdos.

“It was—”

“Cartier,” Keaton whispers into my ear, and Kyrin’s eyes flick back to his face, and all of that worry that was etched into his face moments before has evaporated. Lilith touches his arm and he shifts slightly into her. Who knew. With all of the crazy that Lilith is, she’s the rock of our group. She has become someone I think we all rely on for different reasons, yet... she’s been through the most out of all of us.

Keaton’s bold fingertip skates over my neck. “Tell us what you saw and don’t fucking lie. We already know who you are.” *Thanks to me.* You guys aren’t that fucking smart.

“It’s something that’s going to upset people...” I can’t move my eyes away from Lilith because this... this could be the one thing that pushes her away from me for good.

Kyrin glares at me. “Too late. Doubt I can get more pissed, so just go ahead and douse the fire, Princess.” Keaton’s arms remain locked around my waist, but they’ve relaxed a little, as if he’s relieved that I’ve calmed down enough to speak.

“It’s about Eli.” I chew on my bottom lip as Lilith’s once calm demeanor fires to life. I wince. “And about him still being alive.”

Kyrin hisses through clenched teeth, but Lilith does nothing. She remains in the same spot, her mouth open and her skin paler than normal. Out of all the things Kyrin thought I was about to say, I'm guessing that wasn't one of them.

"Lilith—" She steps closer to me and fear prickles over my skin. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. She totally deserves to beat my ass, and I'll take it because I deserve it. She has kept my secret, and I couldn't even tell her hers. I'm a shitty friend. Cold hands come to my cheeks. Or I'm running hot. "I'm sorry..." My eyes spring open, a new set of tears threatening to wash through me. God. I may have been training for my position for years, and I may be this person to The Fathers and to others, but hiding it from my people all this time has been hard, and after unloading everything in the space of a few hours, I've realized just how heavy it was.

"Wait—" Kyrin stops the conversation, gritting his teeth. "We need to have this conversation in a room."

"My room—" I answer, looking between all of them and Kill, who is watching the whole ordeal without saying a single word. This isn't good. Killian has something to say about everything and everyone, so if he's silent, then I know we're all in trouble. "—My room because I know it's not bugged."

"And how do you know that?" Kyrin snickers as I shuffle out of Keaton's grip.

I ignore him and move to the elevator, well aware that they're all following me, except for Keaton, who is directly beside yet somehow slightly in front of me. I'm worried about Lilith. About how she's going to take this news and what that might mean for her and me, but I know that the longer I keep it from her, from them, the more I have to do this on my own and I can't do it on my own anymore.

I can't.

I've tried. I've tried so hard over the years to gain access to information on the takeover, and to get to Eli and the reason as to why he thought he was helping me by going with them. Why they even wanted me to begin with, and anyone I've asked—The Fathers only—they haven't known. They give me the same answer, that it has to do with my biological father and Patience, but I know.

I know this is something worse than that or Eli wouldn't have gone through great lengths to keep me away from them. Patience was bad, but we

buried them months ago.

This is something entirely different, and to crack it open, I need them. I need them to know everything. The guilty secrets you carry are always held in the dark clouds that hover over you while you keep them. This is me popping that cloud.

I push the PH and swipe my card. The space in the elevator is already small without Keaton, Ky, and Killian's big ass bodies filling it, and that's not including the energy that surrounds them all. I lean over to take a look at Lilith, but she's curled under Kyrin.

The corner of my mouth curves in a small smile, not enough to be obvious, but enough to release my heart from the happiness it's holding. I never thought I'd see my brother happy, much less happy with two people. *I need to get Eli back.*

The doors ping and open right into the room I'm staying in. I don't care enough to really look at everything right now, so I take the three steps down into the entrance room and quickly find the kitchen that's curved around the corner and adjacent to the sitting room with large blue, red, and yellow stained-glass windows. The furniture looks basic, and it isn't long before Jordan and Christopher are rounding the corner of one of the bedrooms.

I nod at them reassuringly, as if to say that I'm okay, though I'm not sure I am.

"Um... meet me over there—" I point to the lounge and watch as everyone shuffles through, Killian on his phone and Lilith remaining silent beneath Kyrin.

Keaton stays behind in the kitchen, watching as I open the fridge and pull out a bottle of wine. I don't like wine, but this will do.

I take down two goblet glasses that look far too big for white wine, and pour them to the rim before scooping them up and carrying them to the lounge, setting one on top of the coffee table in front of Lilith, and placing the other on my lap once I've lowered to the two-seater.

Keaton stays in the kitchen, but I can feel his gaze all over me like an inferno of fire ripping rapidly through a forest.

I slowly raise the glass to my mouth and take one large gulp. And then another. And another until I feel the warmth from the wine mix with the one Keaton is leaving behind with his obvious staring.

"Eli is alive, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you all that I knew." I squeeze the stem of the wineglass, sheepishly following the trail up until I'm met

with Lilith's purple gaze. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Lilith leans forward to grab her wine, following my steps and taking a few gulps before placing it onto the coffee table again. "I'm not upset with you about that, Cartier, so long as you tell me why you kept it from us." Us? My eyes swing to Kyrin, then back to Keaton, and to Kill who is launching up from the sofa and making his way to the entrance again, no doubt to meet King. Christopher follows Kill, slowly rounding my sofa as if to stand directly behind me as Jordan moves to the kitchen bar.

"Hold up!" Keaton breaks the tense silence. He points to Jordan and Christopher. "You two motherfuckers think we're going to hurt her?"

Christopher is the first to speak. "Every person is a threat to her. That is simply how it is."

Keaton pushes off the fridge he was leaning on, taking big strides toward Christopher, but I launch up from the sofa, stopping him with my hand on his chest.

"No!" His chest is hard and warm, and even though I'm staring straight at his pecs, I know that all it would take would be me to tilt my head upward to see the storm in his eyes. "That is what they are trained for, Keaton. Leave my men alone."

Keaton snarls, and I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who hears the growl in his voice. "You'll pay for that." His words are for me, and the same game of cat and mouse prickles over my skin. The fear, the pleasure, and everything else in-between. He backs up slowly, retreating the same way he came.

"Tell me more, Cartier. Ignore Keaton and his dick riding competition," Lilith interrupts. As she should.

After lowering myself back onto the sofa, I swallow yet another swig of the wine, sighing once it's lowered my heart rate.

"All I know is that when he was babysitting me all those years ago, Dominic Stranger broke into my apartment in the city. At the time, I thought they came for Eli since we were followed earlier that day while we were out riding in his car—"

"What?" Kyrin interrupts, and I pause, annoyed that I'm once again having to stop my story to talk about shit that has no relevance to the endgame.

"What, what, brother?" My tone is sharp. I intended it to be. "You found out about him and me being close."

“I know that!” he snaps, and when I really look into Kyrin’s eyes, I can see our father in there—or should I say his father—he’s like the shadow that follows him everywhere without him knowing. It’s not a bad thing, it’s just... a scary thing. “Why were you riding around with him?”

“Because I was getting drunk with Nial at this bar down the road—”

“—what? How the fuck old were you when you were drinking at this fucking bar?” Keaton’s turn to snap at me now.

My shoulders pull back and my eyes narrow on his. “Old enough to fuck you. And have you phone fuck me outside of it.”

Keaton’s face falls as if he remembers.

Kyrin launches off the chair. “What!” *Oh God. This is not good.* He continues his steps toward the kitchen, angered and heavy. “You fucked my sister back then!” he yells so loud spit flies out of his mouth and the veins in his neck swell against his skin.

Lilith and I look back at each other, our expressions mirroring one another. I cheers her and she responds with her own as we both take another sip of wine. Something smashes to the floor around yelling, and I think King has entered, and Christopher has taken the spot beside me on the sofa, his hand resting on mine with reassurance. Glass is flying, more yelling, and all Lilith and I do is sit. And wait. And drink.

I squeeze my thigh. “This guy...” I whisper, and even above the boys fighting in the kitchen, Lilith’s attention is solely on me. She shifts to the coffee table, sitting directly opposite me now with her wineglass between the palms of her hands.

“Tell me,” she urges, her eyes wide and cheeks rosy. “Tell me it all.” Eli has always been the lifeline between Kyrin and Lilith. They needed him to stay alive the same way that they needed him to not kill each other.

“On this day, we thought we got away from them, but we drove back to my apartment and Dominic was sitting in the lounge with two other people. He looked like he stepped right out of a mafia movie.” The yelling has simmered down enough to hear me speak, and it’s not until I open my mouth to say the next part that I feel the flame of Keaton hover right beside me until he’s sitting on the couch. “I thought it had to do with Eli. I mean, for years I assumed it had to do with him because of The Kings. I thought it was one of their dodgy dealings and they’d come to collect—or I don’t know—whatever.” I take another sip as Keaton’s thigh presses against mine.

My pulse slows in my ears, but I continue. “Their exchange was odd. Almost as though they both knew why the other was there, but none of them were going to say it out loud. I’ve replayed it over and over in my head. Like what did I miss? Was there something I could have picked up on?” I shake my head. “The man wasn’t there for Eli. I think some of you met him already at one of his venues. Anyway, when I finally hunted them down and found Eli after months of trying, I stumbled across Dominic again. That was when Eli told me to stop looking or people were going to get hurt and that he has it under control.”

“Dominic...” King repeats out loud, a glass of whiskey between his fingers as he looks down at the street below from the window. His hair is a mess and there’s sweat soaked into his shirt. No doubt from trying to break up Kyrin and Keaton. “I wouldn’t have thought he was really into anything. Aside from his clubs.”

“I’ve done some research since then,” I say, catching Jordan’s eye and nodding at him.

Jordan smiles weakly before disappearing and returning with my laptop. He places it on the coffee table beside Lilith and I open it up, typing in my password.

“So he *is* alive?” Lilith whispers so low I almost miss it.

I rest my hand on her thigh. “He is. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. Please know that I’m trying to do what’s best for him.”

Her lip quivers a little, her eyes turning glassy. “I don’t care about that. I’m just glad he’s alive.” I look over her shoulder to where Kyrin stands in the kitchen, holding a glass of vodka and staring out the window, his back turned to us. What he says to come clean with her will be between them. It’s not my place to tell Lilith that he’s known all along.

The screen on my laptop opens up to a map, and my phone starts blaring on the coffee table. I swipe it unlocked, pressing speaker.

“Nial, you’re on speaker!”

“Owee, who’s all here?” His voice is like an old memory knocking on the withered door inside my brain where all of my secrets lie behind.

“Everyone. Can you pull up the map that you sent me last week, please?” Without even touching my laptop, things start changing and a new screen is up. There’s a cream-colored paper and black lines with signs and address posts with the words *Prague* over the top.

“We’re not here for a show...” Lilith declares softly, moving Keaton out of the way to sit directly beside me. Her attention is solely on my laptop.

“Yes and no,” I answer, looking around at everyone.

“How do you mean yes and no? And why didn’t you just fucking tell us this to begin with and stop all of the theatrics, Cartier? Fuck.” King has always been snappy with me, but I throw back twice as hard, so I don’t expect him to soften his edges as we’ve gotten older.

“Because I don’t trust everyone, King. I don’t trust everyone in Kiznitch.” I don’t bother looking at him as I speak, watching the map change on my laptop.

“And what the fuck’s that supposed to mean?” King bites, a little harsher than usual.

Keaton kicks out his leg, spreading his arm behind both Lilith and me. “Brother or not, watch your fucking tone with her.”

Kyrin finally turns, facing the couch that all three of us are sitting on. Before King can answer Keaton back, Kyrin points with his finger between Keaton and me.

“Not right now!” I snap, sick of the testosterone in this room.

Kyrin snickers, slamming the glass onto the counter so hard it smashes. “Yes, the fuck right now because I’m fucking sick of watching you both dance around each other like you think I’m fucking stupid.” He leans his body weight on each arm, spread wide and resting on the counter.

“Because you are fucking stupid.” Lilith launches to her feet. “You think this is a great time to press your sister, who by the way is not a fucking child anymore, Kyrin, about her sexual relationship with someone who, if I’m being honest, I would rather her be with than one hundred of the stupid fools you have *assumed* she has been with! Now shut up so we can save Eli and find out what the fuck is going on.” My fingers connect with hers as I tug her back down onto the sofa, squeezing her hand reassuringly. It bothers me that Kyrin is wanting to do this right now, knowing how hard Lilith took Eli’s death. He should be wanting to save him and see whatever is going on.

Kyrin’s anger dissipates, his otherwise tight features suddenly soft. My heart squeezes in my chest.

“Ky, I’m sorry, okay? But she’s right. We can’t do this right now.”

“Are you both fucking around? I just need to know.” His voice is low, his head hanging between his shoulders.

“Why the fuck does it matter!” I yell back at him as Lilith slides the laptop over onto her lap and swipes Nial off speaker, bringing my phone to her ear. Clearly, he is not wanting this to wait.

“Yes, it’s fucking happening.” Keaton doesn’t even sound bothered. “And has happened. Multiple times.”

“Anyone—” Kyrin slowly lifts his head. “It could have been anyone else.”

“Thank fuck it wasn’t...” Keaton adds, and I’m seriously wondering why he’s being so bold. I’ve always known that he wanted Kyrin to know, but not like this.

“You think he truly cares about you, Cartier? The way that I want someone to care about you?” Kyrin pushes off the kitchen counter and takes slow, calculated steps into the lounge where we’re all sitting. I can see in the corner of my eye that both Killian and King are hovering near Kyrin, knowing that he’s probably a hair away from snapping. “You *really* think that if he did care about you the way you deserve, that I would want you to be with him? That I wouldn’t be upset about this at all?” He’s directly in front of me now, leaning down until we’re at eye level.

Keaton’s thigh hardens against mine.

Kyrin’s dark eyes burn through my skull. The corner of his mouth curves upward. “I tried to stop you from making a mistake, Cartier, because you’re my sister and I’ve loved you from the second I laid eyes on you. I would kill and be killed for you, so do you not think I’d want you to be happy?”

My throat throbs as I swallow. “I—” I search for the words I know he wants. What does that mean? What the hell is he talking about? Is he right? Is that what this is about?

Kyrin’s head shakes from side to side. “Newsflash, baby sis...” he drawls disappointingly as he leans into the side of my cheek. “He doesn’t, he never will, and he’s not capable...”

“Kyrin!” Keaton snaps, and then all hell breaks loose. Kyrin’s fist goes flying into Keaton’s jaw with a crack, but Keaton takes it, his arms wide on either side.

He swipes the blood from his split lip with the back of his hand, smirking up at Kyrin. “I’ll give you that one.” Then he pushes up from the sofa, cracking his neck to the side. “I’d give you one for every time she

screamed my name, but then that'd be a death wish—" Kyrin's fist flies again, and I hear bone fracture as it collides with Keaton's cheek.

They tumble into the lounge room, and just as Keaton drags Kyrin to his feet, I drag my attention away from the two idiots, coming back to Lilith. I'll leave King and Kill to deal with it.

Lilith hands me the phone and I take it, nudging my head toward the hallway. There's no way we'll be able to do anything in here, and the last time Keaton and Kyrin fought, it lasted two hours and they both broke each other's jaw, and nose, dislocated their arm and leg, fractured a rib to the point Kyrin had internal bleeding and was pissing blood for weeks, and Keaton couldn't walk properly for three days.

That was over a jump. A fucking trick. This could last longer, and I don't care to watch two people I care about kill each other.

I close the bedroom door behind me and drop the laptop onto the made bed. "Talk to me."

"What the fuck is happening over there?" Nial asks, and I put him back on speaker and sink to my knees in front of the bed.

"Kyrin just found out about Keaton and me."

"Oh. Fuck..."

"Yeah," I reply, twisting my hair into a topknot on my head.

"But not Eli?"

My eyes bug out and my mouth pops open. I quickly look up at Lilith to find her grinning down at me. God, I love this woman. The most unproblematic and understanding person walking this planet. "Nial!"

"Oh, shit, sorry!"

"I don't blame you." Lilith grazes my arm with her hip as she lowers herself down beside me.

"Lilith, this was before all of that and only happened once, I swear. It was stupid too because we both laughed afterward and decided that our bond was two hundred percent platonic."

"I get it!" Lilith widens her eyes at me. "Chill. I wouldn't tell your brother for another three months, though, if I were you. He's..." Her words die off on the end.

We both answer, "Kyrin."

"Okay, as much as I am living for y'all's family drama over there, this is important. So I tracked the coordinates to an address in Prague. It looks to be somewhere on the outer edge of Riverton. Do you know where that is?"

I shake my head even though I know he can't see. "No, but we do have an event with The Fathers tomorrow night, so I'm sure I can look around."

"Hmph..." Lilith whispers. She turns to face me just as something crashes in the lounge. Neither of us flinches. King's voice bellows through the plaster boards before there's more crashing, but I'm too lost in what's happening right here to care. I'll deal with both of them later. I knew it was coming. The thing with The Brothers of Kiznitch is that they fight as hard as they love, and Keaton and Kyrin have been the closest out of all of them all of their lives. No one else gets to decide how they feel about each other. Their friendship is their own.

"When you said that you don't trust Kiznitch, were you talking about The Fathers?" Lilith asks from beside me.

I nod slowly, but it's Nial who fills her in. "There's a traitor within that circle. A lot of shady shit going on in there and we're trying to figure out why. I know E knows what's happening, but that boy is tight-lipped."

"Maybe it has something to do with The Elite Kings, that's why?" Lilith adds, massaging her temples.

Nial slurs, "Yes and no. We know that there's something going on with Cartier, but you might be right about the EKC too." He pauses. "I've sent you over the coordinates, and don't you both go alone. I swear to *God* you don't know what you're walking in on and—" I swipe the phone call right, ending the call.

Lilith and I pause for a second, our eyes colliding.

"Are you on the same page as me?" I whisper.

Lilith nods, pushing up from the bed. "Can you still fight as good as you did with Patience?"

"Ha!" I narrow my eyes. "Better, since I couldn't blow my cover then."

"Good." Lilith moves around the room. Thankfully, it's my room with all of my luggage. She unzips my bag, yanking through clothes. "Now we just need to slip past the chaos out there."

I drop to the floor beside her, taking out a pair of yoga pants, hoodie, and a crop, quickly changing as Lilith slips into something similar. I slide open the pocket inside the suitcase, taking out two of the knives I have locked in the secret compartment.

"What about your two boyfriends?" Lilith asks, tucking a knife between her tits.

“They’ll be the ones taking us and getting us out of here.” There’s a knock on the door, and I immediately know it’s not my fuckhead of a family since none of them would knock. Swinging the door open to Jordan, I lean in. “Get the car and get Christopher to help us out of here without being seen.”

Jordan nods before disappearing down the long hallway. There’s still talking—yelling—going on downstairs, but I block it out, waiting for Christopher. The lounge room is in front of the kitchen, hiding the elevator access so all we have to do is tiptoe down the stairs.

Christopher stops between the stairs and the kitchen, blocking the only crack of view that they could spot us through, and I grab Lilith by the hand, directing us down. My Vans squeak against the wood, but because King is yelling at both of them, I’m pretty sure they don’t hear it.

Taking the steps quickly, we rush past Christopher and hit the G button. Seconds pass and I feel like I might explode from the anxiety, and it’s not until the doors part and close that I finally release the breath I was clearly holding.

“Shit.” Lilith leans over, resting her hands on her knees in a huff. “Damn, I thought we would for sure get caught.”

“There’s only one thing that will distract any of those boys, and that’s each other.” The elevator drops down and I turn to face her. “I don’t know what we’re about to walk in on, or if it’s anything. There’s a high probability that this is a decoy, especially if they know I have eyes on their movements, but I’m sick of waiting. I want him home, Lilith.”

Her smile falls sadly. “I know. Me too. We can at least scope it out tonight.”

That is definitely the plan. “Yes.”

The doors part and we scurry through the reception area, ignoring the looks from behind the desk and dashing outside until the cold air sends chills through my lungs. The car is already waiting on the curb and I quickly slide into the back with Lilith right behind me.

Jordan’s eyes come to mine in the mirror. “Where to?”

I take my phone out of my pocket and open up the link Nial sent, syncing it to the car’s Bluetooth.

“That’s about a fifteen-minute drive out.” He pulls away from the curb.

“Is it the same way we’re going tomorrow for the party?” I ask the question that has been scratching the back of my mind since Nial told me

Eli is in Prague.

“No.” He drives us onto the main road. “That will be in the opposite direction, but around the same distance.”

“Kyrin knew about him being alive, didn’t he?” Lilith’s voice breaks toward the end.

I pause, my finger hovering over the screen of my phone. “What gave it away?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” she answers sarcastically. *Kyrin is in so much trouble*. Wish I could feel bad for him. I don’t. “Maybe the fact that he didn’t even flinch when you said he was alive and then decided to start a fight with Keaton instead.”

I sigh, turning in my seat. We have fifteen minutes, so I may as well use it to tell her all that I know. “I don’t know why he didn’t tell you, but yes, he knew. I—” I pause, trying to find the right way to say my next words. “I’m the new CEO of Midnight Mayhem. I have been for some time, since Delila died, actually, but I’ve stayed low-key. Just this morning—or night, depending on the time zone—The Brothers found out about that. They’re all lashing out the only way they know how.”

“I figured, but why does it matter that that’s what you’re doing? Isn’t that a good thing? You are Kiznitch, you should be in Mayhem, but you were never allowed to be in the shows because of Kyrin?”

“Yes and no,” I answer, trying to hold back my tears. “Yes, because you’re right, but no, because there are a lot of activities that me being in this position entails. Keaton for one, he and I will be working a lot closer together for reasons that we both probably don’t want to be.”

“What does Keaton do? Like, for Kiznitch?”

I chew on my lower lip. “Well, he’s a catcher.”

“A catcher?” Lilith’s head tilts in confusion. A second later, her words catch up to her brain and her eyes widen. “Oh.”

“Yeah...”

“So he traps the recruits and is the reason for their PTSD?”

My smile doesn’t reach my eyes. “Yes, and he, well, he puts them down if they don’t obey.”

“Damn.” Lilith whistles. “So he’s bad, bad, huh? That’s why Kyrin doesn’t want you with him.”

I shake my head because unfortunately it’s a lot worse than that. “No. I feel like that has to do with something completely different, or Kyrin would

be a hypocrite. He, for one, knows a killer can still love. A killer's love is as violent as the art in which they take lives."

Lilith pats my thigh. "Touché."



Frustrated

Keaton

Metallic liquid sits on the back of my throat as I glare at Kyrin through damp lashes. Blood stings my eyes when I rub my palm over them. “You done?” We’re sitting opposite each other on the floor like two fucking toddlers who can’t use their words to resolve an issue.

Kyrin tenses his jaw. “You just had to. You just fucking had to fuck with her!”

I’m bored with the back and forth. “Shut the fuck up, Ky. The days of you controlling her were over the second you planted Eli on babysitting duties.”

Kyrin launches forward, but Kill catches him by the back of his now torn shirt, yanking him back in place.

I rest my head against the wall, swallowing back clots of blood while keeping my eyes locked on the ceiling. “You’re thinking too much into it.”

After a second, Kyrin lets out a bark of laughter. “Motherfucker, you have made it so much worse for yourself. You think when she finds out, she’s going to want you? You, my fucking brother, have just signed her fucking loss of humanity paperwork because when she finds out? It’s over, Keaton. Done.”

Her eyes swirled with a kind of carnage I wanted to fuck right out of her. She was a savage hidden in feathers. Fuck, but I needed to feel her around me. I hated myself for it too and would never admit it to Kohen or Kill.

“What?” She leaned forward a little farther until her lips grazed mine. “Not so sure about wanting me now, huh?”

My hand flew to her throat and I clenched around the delicate organ, hissing when I felt it crunch beneath my grip. “Heard you’re a daddy’s girl.”

“You heard right,” she sneered defiantly.

Shoving her against the concrete wall so hard her head bounced off it, I leaned down until my lips touched the shell of her ear. “So then be a daddy’s girl...”

Her knee flew up, hitting me right in the dick and I fell backward, releasing her throat. “Fuck!”

“Not even if I found you in a club!”

“You did find me in a club!” I snapped, contemplating cracking Kill’s neck since he’s laughing on the other side of the cell.

She leaned down as I stood straight, and I towered over her with my fists clenched on either side of my body. “I told you. I’m not like the other hostages you have here. All the little birds too afraid to fly.”

I shoved her backward and slipped out of her cell, slamming the door closed behind me.

“Brother, I think you may have just met your match.”

Yeah, and she’s about to fucking burn like one.

I paused once we passed another cell, one where a boy a few months older than Kerry sat, his knees raised to his chest and his head hanging between his arms. “Kenan.”

Slowly, he lifted his head and the glint of dried blood over half of his face stared back at me. “Yeah?”

I tilted my head. “You ready?”

“Yeah.” He stood. “About fucking time.”

He strolled past me and headed for the door as Kill chuckled from behind. “What’s your plan with her? We can’t kill her or fuck her, so now what?”

“Now I fucking break her.”

“She won’t find out.” I narrow my eyes on Kyrin as the final word leaves my mouth like a threat. Because it is. I will fucking cut his tongue out of his mouth if he even *breathes* a word about it.

Kyrin pushes up from the floor, spitting a mouthful of blood in front of me. “And that is exactly why I never wanted you near her.”

I wince. For the first time in all my years, words affected me in a way that made me want to crawl away into a shell and hide. And I don’t fucking hide. I do the finding.

Kyrin stomps up the stairs, and it’s not until he’s out of earshot that Killian opens his mouth. “You know he’s right and has a point.”

“Kill.” I squeeze my eyes closed. “Shut up and get me a drink.”

He chuckles, but it’s Kyrin’s loud and heavy footsteps running back down the stairs that send goose bumps down the back of my neck.

Kyrin clenches his jaw. “They’re fucking gone.”

“Fuck!” I pull my phone out of my pocket and hit dial on Nial’s number. He answers straight away. “Where are they?”

“What happened?”

“Nial...”

“Fuck, okay, sorry. I told her not to go alone. I’ll hack the security cams and see if I can get anything for you. Sending over the address now.”

I scoop up the keys on the coffee table and pause in front of Kyrin, who’s still staring at me like I’ve kicked his fucking kitten. I didn’t. I just fucked his baby sister. “We can do this later.”

“You don’t fucking care about her, Keaton, so why the fuck would you do it?”

“Oh, and you know what I care about?” My brows raise to my hairline, and before he can say another word, I walk toward the door. He can be as mad as he wants, but right now, I need to know where the fuck she is and how she gets away with all the fucking secrecy.

Kyrin’s behind me in his car, and a Lambo behind him. I can’t fucking see straight. Whatever Cartier is doing, I know she’s doing it for Eli, but she’s being reckless.

“How long do you think he’s going to be mad at you for?” King asks from the passenger seat, his finger tapping to the strum of Dru Hill and Redman’s “How Deep is Your Love”.

“I don’t even know at this point.” I drop it down a gear, making my way onto the highway.

“You know he has a point.” His head turns to the side.

“Nah, man. You don’t get to do this. You, of all people, work her up the most. You don’t get to ride my dick about her too.”

“Yeah, Keat, I do, because as much as Cartier and I fight, she’s still like a little sister to me. You broke the code. Only one girl you couldn’t have, and you just had to have her.”

I cluck my tongue against the wall in my mouth. “It isn’t like that with her. You think I fucking want to hurt her any more than any of you do?” I look between King and the road, the flashing lights that line the asphalt burning my retinas. “I fucking don’t. But it’s who we are.”

“You can’t tell her. You took a blood oath. We all did. Probably why Ky is pissed the most.”

I slam it into third and press my foot to the ground. “I fucking know.”



Fifteen

Cartier

It's quiet. The kind of silence that exists for mourning, or right before your boyfriend is about to break your heart. I've never had my heart broken. I never thought much about that until now. I'm twenty, and I've never had my heart broken because only one man has ever had the chance to hold it.

We stop outside a large white house with a wraparound porch. Sprinklers spray all over the plush green lawn.

"Is it possible that whoever this is, is Kiznitch or Elite Kings? I mean, this is money..."

I lean over Lilith, pushing the window button down, but it doesn't work.

"I'm not allowing you to do that, Cartier. I don't know if it's safe." Jordan doesn't say another word as he checks the barrel of his gun.

"It is quiet." Lilith's voice is a notch above a whisper.

"I know..." There isn't any movement outside the house. Almost as though no one lives here.

After our escape from Patience a few months ago, I feel confident with Lilith. I know she's got my back, as I do hers.

"Let's go check it out..." I pat my ankle, feeling the holster and the knife in my pocket. I can fight. I fight well, but it's still good to know I

have a couple of weapons on me just in case I find myself locked in combat with multiple men.

“Wait—” Lilith’s hand is on my arm and I rest backward. “Eli hasn’t told you anything?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head and reach for the door handle.

“Why?!” Lilith grinds her teeth and I watch firsthand when her anger surfaces. Poor Eli. He’s going to have her wrath in the palm of his hand when this is all over.

“I don’t know, but something tells me Dom has a plan, and whatever that plan is, it involves Eli. That’s all I have right now.”

I reach for the door handle again, Lilith following closely behind. Jordan knows the drill. As much as it pains him to watch me walk into a house that could possibly be filled with traps, he still takes orders from me.

I jog lightly up the driveway, ducking beneath an overgrown tree that falls over the road.

Lilith closes in behind me. “Why are the lights off?”

“I don’t know.” I pull my knife out of the holster in my jeans. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“What do you mean?” Lilith’s whispers are a little too loud, but with all the anxiety she’s probably dealing with right now, with finding out about Eli being alive, and then him being alive but now accessible, I’ll give it to her.

“Look!” I gesture toward the house. The door is slightly ajar, and even though it looks like the lights are off, there seems to be a flicker of light coming from the window upstairs.

“Oh.” She puts one foot in front of the other, and before I can stop her, she’s running up the stairs and to the front door.

“Dammit, Lilith!” Crazy bitch. I find myself once again pissed that I brought her. Yes, I feel safe with her because after we both escaped Patience, I learned that not only does she look pretty, but she can fight dirty. Very well. I wonder why she didn’t ask how I could fight when that all happened?

I follow behind her, looking over my shoulder as I climb the steps two at a time. Shoving open the door, I pause at the threshold, listening for movement. The lights are off downstairs, blanketed in darkness, but lucky for me, one of my training was other sight. Using other areas from your defense system when one is shot.

A tap drips slowly.

A clock ticks.

A single creak from the floorboards upstairs.

I jump to life and run up the stairs, looking for the light that's coming from the bedroom.

"Lilith!" My need to know that she's okay outweighs my other thoughts as I push open the door that flashes light from below.

A single TV is sitting on a cart where a video recording is playing in grungy quality.

"What..."

"You are going to be the best asset." The man slid down the wall directly in front of me, his eyes searching mine. They called him Mr. Strange, and it suited him. It really did. Only he wasn't strange. I understood him. I knew what he liked and didn't. He wasn't strange. "Do you want to be a good girl for me?"

I didn't need to move to know that my head was already nodding up and down. I wanted to. I wanted to be a good girl for him. "Good."

His hand came to mine and I looked at them both together. He was old. Old enough to be my father. "How old am I?"

He raised me to my feet. He stayed hidden from the camera, but I could see him just clear. "They will say too young, but I say perfect."

I looked directly down the camera lens, my head leaning to the side. "Who is they?"

His finger dropped down my cheek, into the front of my top, where he rested it against my nipple. "They are you. They are all there for you."

I slam against the wall on the other side of the room, sweat sliding down the side of my face. "What?"

Lilith's hands are on my face, swiping my hair away from my welted skin. "Hey! Hey!"

"No!" I scream at her, squeezing my eyes closed. "This isn't supposed to happen, they weren't supposed to get in my head, Lilith! They—they—not me! What—" The door bursts open, and both Kyrin and Keaton stare down at Lilith and me curled in the corner. "What the fuck is that!" I scream at all of them, pointing toward the TV. "Who is that little girl, and why do I see this memory in my fucking head?" Before the tape can replay,

Keaton kicks it over with his foot and grabs at his hair, turning back to face me but looking right at Kyrin.

“No!” I push up from the ground until I’m standing directly below both of them. I know Kill and King are hovering in the back somewhere, and someone else who I’m guessing is Kohen, but right now, I need to see Kyrin and Keaton, because they’re the ones I know when they’re lying. “What was that? No one was supposed to come near my head!”

Keaton steps in front of Kyrin, shoving him out of the way. “Who was it that was with you?”

My mouth snaps closed before reopening. “I—I don’t know.” I squeeze my eyes closed, frustrated that I can’t remember. Bile rises up my throat anyway, as if my body recognizes even if my mind doesn’t. “Keaton.” His name comes out with an exhale and my knees give way. I start falling when he catches me with his arm before I hit the ground.

“I promise we will figure out whatever is happening.” His finger touches my temple as he swipes my hair away from my face.

“You promise?”

His eyes search mine, like a tornado ripping through a forest. “Yes, I promise.”

“You could have told me.” I push up from the ground, looking between Keaton and Kyrin. Kyrin, who is glaring at the back of Keaton’s head. Clearly, he’s still not okay on the whole Keaton and me fucking around thing. “Both of you could have told me. I know you knew. Part of Killian’s mastery is seeing when someone’s memories and mind have been tampered with. You think that was Dominic with me?”

King steps in the middle, nudging his head to the door. “We can talk about this back at the hotel. I don’t know, but this place will be wired up hotter than hell.” I follow behind King when he leads us out, but I don’t believe him when he says he doesn’t know. The way they all look between each other before answering me is a red flag.

Keaton’s slightly behind me, and Kyrin and Lilith behind him. So close. We came so close to finding Eli and bringing him home all for what? To be shown a memory that the boys never told me about?

And what else are they not telling me? A part of me is hurt. That deep part that always trusted them without question is now at the surface of my mind, scratching, teasing, like a warning.

I shouldn’t have given them that trust so easily.

Being in Prague wasn't ideal now that we knew Eli wasn't here, so we packed up and gathered everyone back onto the plane. The questions were annoying, but nothing I couldn't brush off. We needed to get back to familiar ground so that I could separate Mayhem from Kiznitch. I didn't need to drag a couple of hundred people around the world as a disguise anymore now that all cards were out on the table. We still hadn't spoken about anything. I knew we were all waiting until we were back at The Village.

Once we were back, I met with the boys in their bus sans Perse since she was kicked out for this conversation and sulking outside.

"By the way, Perse already hates me. She's going to even more now that she knows I'm in here when she's not."

"You're the fucking CEO," Keaton snaps, baring his teeth slightly before dragging his rage onto King. "And she'll either respect that or fucking learn to."

King's finger taps against his own thigh. "She will. I just have to talk with her about it. She doesn't hate you, Cartier. She was the first to like you out of the new girls."

"She was the first one I met out of all the new girls," I correct, but honestly not caring how much she hates me. I just hate that King is in the middle of it.

King snickers. "There's something about Dominic Stranger that you need to know." Behind King is Killian, smoking on a joint, and beside him is Kohen. I haven't seen Kohen much lately, but I know he and Dove have been seeing each other. I can see it in his eyes. He's not as frantic as he is when he hasn't been around her. They're Harley and Joker, absolutely crazy over each other. The kind of crazy that will kill them one day.

"Well, I'm here, so tell me."

"And me." Lilith raises her drink beside me, and I reach for the filled whiskey sour that's sitting on the table. I actually may need it.

"For a long time, he has been a connection between Kiznitch and The Elite Kings."

"Okay..." I say, leaning back on the sofa. My head hits a pair of hands on the edge and I peer up from below at the perfect jawline of Keaton, who has his eyes directly on Kyrin when he speaks next.

“He has come to tell us something that has given us a reason to re-evaluate our own backyard. For a long time, he wanted to ruin Midnight Mayhem.”

“Hear, hear,” I sigh, massaging my temple with my non-alcoholic hand. “He can get the fuck in line.”

“No—” King shakes his finger. “Not like that. He is an Elite King.” He searches my eyes. “Well, was the brother of a King, a Vitiosis, to be exact.”

“What? What the hell does that mean?” I take the first sip of whiskey. It explains why Eli hated him. There’s obviously bad blood between the two sides. I hiss when fire touches the back of my throat and travels down to my stomach.

“He lost his daughter not long ago apparently. Some explosion at one of their houses. I don’t know, Eli spoke about it briefly, but—”

“Bailey?” Lilith whispers the name, mainly to herself.

Kyrin nods, rounding the couch and picking Lilith up from beneath her arms and sliding into where she sat, placing Lilith on his lap. “Yeah, Bailey.”

“That tipped him even farther over the edge that he was already on. He killed his wife and opened The Connoisseur of the Dark. The only part we can’t figure out is how Eli fits into this...” Kyrin’s voice drifts out, and his tongue sneaks out and catches the corner of his lip. The first time Kyrin ever did that I was ten years old. It was when I asked him if our dad cheated on our mom. He said no, right before his tongue caught the corner of his lip.

Right as he’s about to choke on his *lie*.

“You know how Eli fits into this, Kyrin. You’re just not telling me, and I need to fucking know.”

“We think he’s there for you.” Keaton rounds the couch now, and when he’s standing directly in front of me, he lowers himself onto the coffee table. “No, we know he is.”

“I know that! He told me!”

“No.” Keaton shakes his head, his knees spreading to cage mine in. His tattoo covered hands spread over my knees and I watch as the cherry on his fingers spreads with it. I remember when I asked about that tattoo. It’s the one tattoo that he has never shared the backstory for. Every other tattoo I want to know about, he shares with me openly.

All but that one.

“We think Dominic Stranger has something on you.”

“When I saw Eli a few months ago, he was with Bam Bam, so why—”

“And how the *fuck* do you know Bam Bam?” Keaton’s grip around my legs tightens.

I shove myself out of his hands, but he doesn’t budge. I glare at him. “Because I can’t tell you, that’s why!” I wasn’t lying. There’s no way I am in a position to share with Keaton how I know Bam Bam. Especially not right now.

Kyrin lets out a groan, tilting his head back to rest on the chair as Lilith chuckles into the side of his neck. “Fuck off, bro. I’m not watching you and my fucking sister have angsty *I hate you* foreplay!” His dark green eyes collide with mine. “I ain’t having this shit, Cartier, and I’m still gonna beat his ass.”

“Try, you can try—again...” Keaton teases, and Kyrin flips him off.

“Eli is alive,” Lilith whispers against Kyrin’s neck, tracing the tattoo he has over the side with her finger. “That’s all I care about right now.”

“And we’re going to get him back,” I add boldly, not moving my attention away from Keaton.

“Yes, *we all* are,” Kyrin adds pointedly at me.

Keaton finally releases me and I shoot to my feet, my skin crawling with an unfamiliar feeling that I’m not wanting to touch right now.

“Guess I’m drinking tonight.” I scoop up my glass of whiskey. “But tomorrow, I’m back on finding out what’s happening, and I know where I’m going for answers.”

Keaton ignores me, still smirking widely at Kyrin.

“To The Kings.”

His smirk drops instantly. “The fuck? No, you ain’t.”

I’m desperate to do anything to clear my mind from all the bullshit I feel bubbling up inside of me, so I leave without another word. They can fight among themselves. In all the three years that I’ve known this was what I would be doing, I’ve never felt so many emotions in such a short amount of time.

Delila was right. The training was going to be easy. The hardest part would come once I was immersed in the world, that was when I would find where my loyalties would fall, and where my true friends would lay.

I bang into a body on my way to the Ink Bus and I reach out, patting her arm. “Sorry!”

“No, I’m—” Perse’s eyes come to mine. I’ve always thought Persephone Hendry was beautiful, but she’s also edgy. The very reason why I liked her to begin with was the reason I’m starting to despise her now. I was wrong. I knew why Delila chose her, and it was because she had a fire in her that burned painfully similar to mine. “—sorry.” She finishes, exhaling so loud her shoulders fall with the sound.

“Me too.” I sidestep around her to get back on track when her hand catches mine and I turn back around. I can’t be bothered fighting with her again tonight, especially after everything else, but The Brothers are my family, and their women, men, whatever would also be my family. Family is hard to deal with because they get to know you without *getting to know you*.

“No, I mean I’m sorry for everything, Car. I don’t want to fight with you, like, ever.”

I lower my barrier a little, enough to genuinely smile at her. “I don’t want to either. We’re good.”

“So you’re... doing the whole organizing of everything?”

“Yep.” I shuffle on my feet, running my hands up and down the outside of my puffer jacket. “Everything she did but being ring woman. Honestly, have you met my brother? I don’t think that would have worked out.” We both laugh together before hers dies out.

“You and Eli were close, huh?” It’s the first time Perse and I have spoken without any background noise.

My smile falls and my heart sinks, but the guilt returns, slamming me in the chest. “My best friend.”

“I’m sorry. I hope you guys can bring him home soon.”

“Same.” I push my hands into my pockets, wishing I had one of the few things that distracts me enough.

“I better go. King wants to try again for another baby...”

I wince. I haven’t said anything about the miscarriage, mainly because when it happened, we were told to not mention it. “I’m sorry about that, Perse.”

Her bright eyes come to mine, and just around the brightness of the tea lights I can see them genuinely widen. “Thank you.”

On my way to the Ink Bus, I can’t get that look out of my eyes. Should that have been something I should have said to her a long time ago, after she had lost the baby? Her reaction was almost too sad to replay, so when my fingers wrap around the familiar door and I widen it to a cloud of ganja

smoke, Cypress Hill, and porn playing on a projector, I know I'm going to be fine.

"Ahhh, Princess Mayhem." I like Ice Queen better. Why don't these motherfuckers use that nickname more?

"The tatted knight!" I drop down onto his bed, kicking off my Doc Martens and curling them beneath my feet. Maya is spread on the other side of the bed, her hair spread out beneath her, and her eyes locked on the ceiling. She has a joint between her fingers, a half-smile on her face.

"She hates that name, Linkin. Ice Queen is better." Maya rolls over onto her stomach, her soft curls falling over her shoulder. Maya has always been that girl everyone has loved. Her bright green eyes and wild nature were also something I looked up to growing up. She just had an allure about her that made me want to be her.

"Thank you, May!" I glare at Linkin. "And I need some ink. Stat."

He rolls toward me in his chair, his gun already buzzing. "Where we going and what do you want?" I lie flat on the bed, like Maya but the other way around.

"I kind of want to get a cherry..." Just to piss Keaton off. Would he talk to me about them if I did? Or would he cut it off me? I want to know, now more than ever, what they mean.

"Ahhh, I don't think that's a good idea, baby P."

I turn my body so I can see Linkin from my view. "What does that mean? Did you do Keaton?"

"Ahhh—" Maya raises a single finger, tracing something on the ceiling as she blows out a cloud of smoke. "You want to know about Keaton's past..." The words aren't lost on me. I don't want to know about his past because I've always assumed I know about it.

What past? He doesn't have a past that doesn't involve me. *Does he?*

"Do it." Maya turns her head to me, her eyes glowing with mischief. "Do the cherry, right—" Maya sits up, bringing her finger to my leg and then moves it up my inner thigh. "Right there."

"Look, I love you, but nah, man. I need my fingers right where they are, and I know that if I do that, he's gonna chop them off."

"What the fuck is it with the cherry?"

Maya touches the tip of her nose with her finger. "Time and place, girlfriend." She shifts her gaze back on the ceiling and I know that I've lost her. "Time and place."

“Fine,” I murmur, flicking off the button of my jeans and yanking them down the bed. I lean back again and spread my legs wide, looking between my inner thigh and Linkin. “Then do a coffin.”

“Coffin?” he asks, dipping the tip of his needle into the pot of black ink.

“Yeah. A coffin. Right near my pussy, so that every time I fuck Keaton, I can come thinking I’m burying him.”

Maya hands me the joint between her fingers and I take it, bringing it to my lips and inhaling. I hold it in for a second. “Ky found out about us.”

“He’s always known.” Maya takes the trunk back.

“No, he hasn’t,” Linkin argues. “He’s just... not wanted to think about it.” Maya and Linkin go back and forth as I zone in to the porn that’s playing on the projection screen behind him. Linkin’s bus is a lot smaller than the main ones, but it’s cozy and clean. I love that it’s clean. He’s the son of one of the men in IT, but instead of taking after his papa in the nerdy department, he let his artistry take over and is our tattooist instead. For the shows, customers can come to his bus and pay for small pieces too, but the only requirement is he chooses the tattoo.

“Please.” Maya bangs on her chest, clearing her throat. “If he didn’t know, then you’re not gay.”

“Oh, I’m gay, but he did not know.”

I snatch the joint back off Maya. “My life is hard now. Your mom, man. She was... good.”

“Good?” Maya pauses, pushing up from the bed. “No, she wasn’t.”

The door swings open and Linkin pauses his tattooing for a second.

“Why did I know I’d find you in here?” Keaton’s voice filters through my ears and I turn to the side to look up at him as he leans back on his elbow beside me.

“Bro, your girl just said Delila was good...”

Keaton’s mouth clenches, the sides of his jaw tensing. “Hmmm. Interesting choice of words. Maybe it’s that ganja you’re smoking.” He takes the almost smoked joint from my fingers and flicks it into the sink to the side.

“Yeah, that, or all that talk about cherries...” I test the words.

Keaton freezes, his arm stiff against mine. Jesus, what the fuck is wrong with him?

“All done!” Linkin claps his hands, tugging off the gloves and tossing them at Maya.

I widen my leg farther, pulling the skin on my inner thigh around to see it clearer. “Perfect.”

Keaton grabs my thigh, and I watch his expression change. A slow curve spreads on his mouth. “Alucard...”

I close my legs and glare at him. “You’re done here.”

“Get your fucking pants on.” I jump off the bed and pull my jeans up, tugging them over my ass. I kiss Maya and Linkin before grabbing my jacket and zipping it back on as we make our way down the dimly lit path. The cherry thing is still hovering in the back of my mind, and I know it’s because of what Maya and Linkin said. Am I the only fucking one who doesn’t know what this means to Keaton?

I stop outside my bus—or Delila’s that is soon to be mine—“What’s with the cherry thing?”

Keaton shrugs. “Nothing. Why have you always made a deal out of it?”

“Because I seem to be the only one who doesn’t know what it means.” I swing open my door and leave it open for him to follow.

It closes loudly and I turn around with a chuckle, ready for angry fight sex. Only he’s not there.

The days go uneventfully. Training in the tent, promo on the streets, more tattoos. My alcohol intake has absolutely nothing to do with my newfound stresses either.

I stare back at the screen on my phone, where Nial’s face takes up all the space.

“I’m sorry. I’ll keep looking. On the other hand, Bishop agreed to see you.”

“He did?” I perk up. Bishop Vincent Hayes, the man, the myth, the legend. He is not someone you necessarily want to know that you have a meeting with. But I am. Because if they know something about Eli, I have to find out.

“As soon as you get to Kiznitch, he’ll meet you there. When are you planning to leave?”

“Well.” I swing my legs over the bed and tiptoe into the shower. I know that I should exercise today since I still have the wild energy from last night running through my system, but I can’t focus. “The great thing about being the CEO and not the ringleader is that I don’t have to stay for the shows. I’m planning to leave tomorrow, and I’ll be there for four days as I have

business with The Fathers. We're low on recruits, and I think they're trying to push a new direction with how to go about that."

"Which means..." Nial urges. I can smell his anxiety from here.

"Which means I don't know yet!" I joke, though I know it's not something to laugh about. I turn on the tap and wait for the water to heat up. As nice as these buses are, the hot water is still slow to build up. "We have a party to attend tonight with The Fathers since they canceled the one in Prague. I'm just hoping they haven't snatched some girls off the streets in the meantime..." I laugh awkwardly and Nial joins in.

Our eyes connect on the screen and we both shake our heads.

"Anyway! I'll call you later."

Sliding beneath the water, I close my eyes and run my fingers through my hair, counting down from ten until my breathing is back under control. I was wrong. I thought having The Brothers in the know would make this all easier, but all it has done is make me realize that I gave up a secret I probably shouldn't have so soon.



Sixteen

Keaton

Past

She hated me. Good. I liked it. I needed her to hate me so she could stay away from me. I didn't need nor could I afford someone like her fucking with my head the way she thought she could.

I danced with her.

I got her here.

She's a fucking recruit.

"You seem lost..." she teased from the corner of the cell, her finger running circles on the floor. It's not concrete and old. The flooring downstairs was all carpet in their cells. They had comfortable beds and clean sheets. The whole idea was to get them to bend and play, not to run and cry.

Unfortunately, the ones who did the latter ended up bleeding out down the drain and burned to ash before being scattered over the lake behind this building. There were six rooms, all the cells as walls and doors. Right now, Kerry was in one, and we had twin boys in another. They weren't sure what they wanted to do. Unlucky for them, their family ran, and now they had to pay their parents' bills.

"I'm never lost." I leaned forward on my chair until I rested my elbows on my thighs. "I'm just wondering when you're going to crack and agree."

"Hmmm..." She crawled toward me on her hands and knees. It wasn't until she reached the door that her little fingers wrapped around the poles and she pulled herself up to her feet. She wore the same clothes she did the other night when we took her. It was her way of defiance. Not changing. "I will never do that."

"I can make you." The words weren't supposed to come out as a threat, but I forgot who I was sometimes. I may only be seventeen, but I didn't age the same way others did.

"You killed that man last night." She turned her back to me. "Why?"

"I do it often."

"Do you have reasons?"

"Aside from this?" I asked, pointing around the place even though I knew she couldn't see. Why the fuck I was talking with her, I didn't know.

"Yeah." Her voice was husky, like she'd burned the hairs on her throat from too much nicotine. Way too mature for her age bracket. "I see it in your eyes. I saw it last night when you killed him. You don't do it because you have to." She finally turned back to me, and I studied her face closely. I needed to know why she crawled beneath my skin all to claw her way out. "You do it because you need to."

I leaned back against the chair, losing my thoughts on the way her dark brown hair glided down to her hips. She reminded me of a siren. Small, frail features, and heavy hair. "No. I do it because I want to."

For the first time since that night in the club, I watched as her cherry red lips turned upward in a grin. "Then do it to me."

You can't burn off the memory of killing someone. I've never not wanted to kill someone I've killed. Power lies in the simplicity of rules, and mine were very clear. If they didn't do things a certain way, or if they went against what they were told to do, they were put down. I didn't make the rules, but I sure as fuck was the enforcer. And when I didn't have rules or an outlet... I made one.

"I can't even think of the show right now with everything else going on in the background. What the fuck is even the point? We need to get Eli back on track and figure out what Cartier is doing."

“The show must go on,” King replies, leaning back against one of the chairs used in the VIP booths near the stage. Maya and Val are working on their set, with Perse on the other side of the stage fixing her ballet slippers.

“Cartier isn’t hiding anything else that we *need* to know,” I clarify, ignoring Kyrin hovering at the end of the table like a lion ready to feed. “Ky, fucking chill. You’re making me edgy every time I mention her name.”

“So what is happening there, hmmm?” Kyrin asks, and I know it’s a double-edged sword as far as questions go. It’s also a valid one.

I lean forward on the table. “I know this is hard for you to hear, but Cartier and I aren’t anything new, bro. We really ain’t. We’ve been doing this dance for fucking years, so as far as I’m concerned, I don’t have to answer that question because there is no answer for it. Neither of us is looking at labels, because it has never been labels for her and me. It is just that. Her and me.”

“So you’re both not seeing anyone else? You’re both going to *not* get hurt when the other finds out, oh, I don’t know, that the other has been *lying* to them.” His voice picks up toward the end, and I have to fight with myself not to reach over and clip him in the jaw. The last thing I need right now is Maya and Val stirring the girl drama pot.

“Fuck outta here with that bullshit, Ky. You and I both—no—everyone sitting here right now knows that it has to be this way so she doesn’t get hurt.”

Kyrin’s jaw clenches, his eyes stirring with anger. I get it. He’s mad as fuck. I always knew it was going to happen, but I didn’t consider *this*. It slipped my mind. I don’t know what’s going to happen. In fact, I would do everything in my power to make sure she never finds out.

Including lying to her.

“Look!” Killian snaps his fingers in front of my face, forcing all of our attention on him. “We can’t be doing this. Keaton is right, that whole thing there is something she doesn’t have to know—no—shouldn’t know. We can’t have it. If she finds out that—” His face pales and King shifts uncomfortably beside him. “No, yeah, it’s bad.” Killian breathes out loudly, surrendering his hands in the air. “I ain’t got nothing. It’s fucking bad. Like *really* fucking bad.”

“What are you all talkin’ about?” Kohen slams his hands on the table. Fucking Kohen. He knows everything too.

“About a big fat secret that you will keep, because if you don’t, I’ll kill you,” I answer flatly, my eyes drifting over his shoulder when I see the girls all packing up.

“If you’re talking about something that rhymes with berry, then you have my word.” Kohen’s mouth curves upward in a sinister smile. “Though, I don’t know if you have Dove’s.”

“Then you better sort her the fuck out then.” I lower my voice and lean over the table. “Right now.”

Kohen shrugs, dancing off behind the makeshift stage. I point to where Maya and Val were. “Where are they all going?”

“Oh shit!” Kill leans up and grabs the phone from his back pocket. “We gotta get ready. There’s a party tonight and a little birdie told me it’s about recruits.”

I ignore his words and leave, shoving out of Kyrin’s way. He and I haven’t spoken much since the big punch. I can’t be bothered explaining myself and won’t explain myself. I’ll justify a lot of shit in my life. Why I do the things I do, how I am the way I am, but I will never explain Cartier.

I stop outside Delila’s old lilac bus, hearing music spilling out beneath the door. Gripping the handle, I swing it open and find Cartier stirring contents in a lowball glass. Her hair is falling over her shoulders in ocean waves, and her skin shimmers with gold flecks, as if she’s drowned herself in glitter. A little black G-string connects to suspenders, clicking onto a black lace bra that pushes her tits up.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my own personal nightmare.”

I pause. “You wearing that tonight?” Fuck, she looks good.

Her soft lips curve upward in a small smile. “I might. May as well go for tradition?”

I close the door behind me and close the distance. Wrapping my hand around her chin, I force her head up to face me. “Then you’ll probably need that bag of coke that Delila always kept stashed under her bed—you know—since you’re going for traditions.” I cock my head to the side and follow the curves of her neck down to her belly, past her thighs and down to her toes before slowly bringing my gaze back up to rest on her face. “And you look good, baby. You should definitely go like that.”

Her face falls. “What?” She pushes out of my grip and crosses one leg over the other. “I like possessive Keaton. Come back when he’s here.”

I lower myself onto the coffee table, hiding my laugh behind a smirk. “I don’t have to be possessive, Cartier.” Wrapping my fingers around the back of her neck, I force her lips against my own. “Everyone knows you’re *mine*.” I accentuate the N, licking her upper lip with my tongue.

She rests her hands on my thighs, stretching my legs wide and lowering herself to the floor in front of me. “Hmmm, maybe. Or maybe I’ve forgotten?” She bats her lashes up at me, flicking the button of my jeans off and leaning in to run the tip of her tongue over the edge of my bottom lip.

I lift up to allow her to pull my jeans down. When my cock falls out heavy, her little hand wraps around the shaft, not enough for her fingers to touch, but enough for her to direct the tip of my dick between her damp lips.

She peers up at me, flicking her tongue beneath the base of my crown. “Maybe I didn’t forget.”

I wrap her long hair around my wrist until it spills over my closed fist. “You need me to remind you where you belong?” I drag the tip of my other finger over her jaw as she sucks me deeper into the warmth of her mouth.

She peers up at me lazily, shaking her head as I run my finger up over my dick and between her lips. “Good girl, baby.” My balls tighten as she laps her little tongue over the curve of my dick. “Up. I’m hungry.”

She does as she’s told, quickly sitting back on her knees and staying where I left her. She gestures up at me with both her wrists, her red lipstick now smudged.

“Please?”

My brain short circuits when I see her in this position. Fucking Cartier Nero on her damn knees in front of me and all mine to fucking play with. There’s something about the way she says *please*. Like she damn well knows she can take whatever the fuck she wants from me and it’s hers.

“Not yet...” I swipe the saliva from around her lip with my thumb, sucking it off. “Later.”

Her shoulders fall and her mouth parts. “Keaton!”

“Nah, uh, baby.” I grab her by the wrist and help her to her feet. “And you’re coming with me so I can make sure you don’t finish yourself off before I get to.” I drop her hand and make my way to the stairs. “What are you wearing?”

“You know I’m going to have an attitude all night because of this!” she calls from downstairs.

“Fucking counting on it,” I mumble to myself, finding the dress she’s wearing lying on her bed. Picking it up, I grab the shoes that are beside it before jogging back downstairs to find her pouting on the sofa with a freshly poured glass of vodka.

“I hate you.”

“Awww, who doesn’t love a little degradation foreplay?” I nudge my head toward the door. “Get up. Let’s go.”

“Fine.” She pushes up from the chair and snatches the shoes out of my hands, slipping the red bottoms over her feet and doing up the buckles. I go to reach for her jacket, but she glares at me from over her shoulder, widening the door and stomping down the stairs. Shaking my head, I chuckle when the door shuts behind me and we make our way down to my bus.

Sass and Kill stop on the steps of theirs as they close the door behind them. “Ah, what?” He shakes his head and laughs. “I kinda wanna be a part of this!”

“No, you don’t!” Cartier sings back, stopping outside our bus.

Opening my phone, I snap a couple of photos without her knowing. “These will look cute on the Mayhem page. Might bring in a new audience.”

“Ha. Ha.” Her cheeks are blushed red, her shoulders tight. I know she’s frustrated, and it’s right where I want her.

“Oh fuck!” Ky snaps from the kitchen and I hear Lilith laugh around him. “Nuh uh! No way are we doing this.”

I close the door behind me and dump Cartier’s shit onto the closest sofa. “Don’t look at me. Wasn’t my idea.”

“Awww...” Lilith grins, a glass of wine hanging from her fingers. “This is cute.”

Cartier slides up onto the kitchen counter. “I need tonight over with. I have a feeling—” I brush her upper thigh with my broken knuckles when I reach for the bottle of whiskey on the counter.

She hisses, her eyes closing and jaw tensing. I smirk, winking at her as I flick off the lid. It hits her on the tit. She pauses again before continuing. “I think The Fathers are wanting to change the way we recruit.”

“As in...” Kyrin asks, seemingly ignoring the fact that his baby sister is half naked on our counter and I am the reason she is that way. Progress.

“As in, I think they’re wanting to snatch people off the street if needed.”

“We don’t need, though...” Kyrin adds, just as Killian and Sass enter. Killian flashes me a knowing grin, coming into the kitchen and taking the bottle off me. At this point, I don’t really care what she and Kyrin are talking about.

“You know, you’re both fucking crazy. Never thought that would be you two. You both seemed too... uptight.”

“Fuck you. I’m not uptight, I’m selective. And Cartier?” I smirk around the rim of the bottle. “No, yeah, she is uptight. Lucky for me, I know how to undo her.”

Sass unzips the dress for Cartier and places it on her lap when she sees Kyrin shuffling uncomfortably again.

Cartier stands and steps into the gown, pulling it over her body. *Jesus fucking Christ that body.* “There’s something I haven’t told you.”

“You think?” Kill eggs her on from behind, shuffling a deck of cards. “Think that’s obvious.”

“I’m not talking about the whole CEO, trained in all sorts of weird shit for three years thing. I’m talking about something else that I probably should have told you first, but I needed to wait until you knew about me.”

I push off the counter and hold my breath before she says her next words. The door opens again and King and Perse walk through. “Family meeting without us?”

“No.” Cartier turns her back to Sass so she can zip her up. The dress is tight where it needs to be tight before falling around her feet in a puddle. It’s beige with diamonds all over her bodice, giving the illusion that she’s naked.

This fucking girl is going to kill me.

“I was waiting for you both.” She offers a gentle smile before stepping around me with that same bratty look on her face, and reaching for the bottle of champagne on the bar trolley. “Before I go further, you all have to agree to a blood oath with me.”

Pause.

“In Kiznitch.” Her eyes fly around the room.

Silence.

“Tomorrow. In the tombs, like our ancestors did. If I do this, and I bring you all in the way I’m about to, I have to know that I can more than trust you. I have to know that you’re not going to hold secrets from me too. Going forward.” She pauses to fill her flute with bubbles. “I want us to

work together. Not like Delila did. Everything was so disconnected and a power trip. I don't want to come in here and make you all feel like I'm like her. I want us all to run Midnight Mayhem in a sense that we're all equal."

"And you want to do a blood oath for that? Our word isn't enough?" King asks the question we all were about to.

"First of all..." She closes the distance around us, gesturing to the expanded circle with her glass. "All of *your word* doesn't mean shit to me. I'm not stupid. I am not full-blooded Kiznitch—these girls here right now are not Kiznitch. You all don't owe us any loyalty—not even your own woman. This blood oath not only protects you and me, but them too because as much as you've all tried to hide things from them, they're all strong enough to take it." She swallows a loud gulp. "I mean, shit, they handle you all perfectly."

"She has a point." Kyrin runs his hands through his hair. "I hate when she has a point."

I glare at her as I slowly lower myself onto the chair opposite. The bus very rarely feels as small as it does now with everyone in it—except Luna who is no doubt with the makeup artist slash babysitter.

Cartier shakes her head, and I reach out to her fingers, pulling her onto my lap. She falls down with grace, despite the fact that she's anything but. "You guys. I'm not that same girl I was, and I haven't been for so long. I held on to appearances because it's what I knew you wanted to see when you looked at me, but the truth is, the shit I've gone through to get primed to how I am today was exactly as bad as you think it was. But I always promised myself that once you all knew, this was what I wanted to do and how I wanted to run things." I spread my hand over her belly, watching Kyrin as his eyes lower to where my hand is and then to my face.

I blow him a kiss.

He sneers at me briefly before looking back at Cartier. "Fine. Blood oath will be done."

My smile falls. So long as the oath stays completely on track and no one adds in anything to do with anything else, I won't have to lie or come clean. None of us will.

"Good." She slides farther back against me, hitting my dick. Which reminds me, I need to get changed. "I don't trust The Fathers. I haven't for some time. I think they're not only hiding things from us, but they've been lying to everyone. Our mothers included." Her body melts against mine like

a blanket my soul never knew it needed. She feels good here, and I close my eyes when I rest my lips against her upper arm. “I think they’re double dipping. Why else would they need more recruits?”

My eyes pop open and I pull away from her. “What?”

“What the fuck, Cartier, those are some big accusations...” Kyrin snaps, and I know his edginess has more to do with the fact that she’s on my lap and less to do with the fact that it’s a very real possibility that they could be doing what she claims.

She doesn’t move when she says her next words. “I know. And I think that’s why they’re doing this tonight without us knowing.”

“What!” Perse shoots up from the chair she’s sitting on. “They wouldn’t dare do that!”

“Eh, they would.” Killian shrugs. “The Fathers have been shady as fuck for years, but for the most part they’ve stayed on track. There’s no way.”

Cartier pushes her ass into my crotch again and I freeze, looking around the room. She’s playing games. “Yes, but The Dolls, Angels and Demons, and other smaller skits have lowered times, on Kaius’ watch.”

I brush my lips over the shell of her ear. “If you rub against my dick like that again, I’m going to leave bruises on your thighs. You want that, Cartier?”

“What—how did you come to this conclusion?” Kyrin walks into the kitchen and pulls open a drawer. I know what he’s looking for. He finds the joint and places it into his mouth.

Her thighs clench together. “My suspicions kind of started when...”

My footsteps slowed as I walked down the long stairs to what lay below my current office. It was the home of all training and connected to the Recruiting Lounge at the back. The quality of air down here was suffocating, which worked for combat where they trained me for breath play.

I flicked the switch on and watched as each light blinked on down the long room until it shone over a girl who was around the same height as me standing in the MMA ring.

“Um, who are you?”

She took out her earbuds and started untying the wraps around her wrists. “Sorry, I didn’t think you would be coming down here.” I hadn’t seen her before. She had long brown hair, deep-set eyes, and sharp

cheekbones. Kind of like mine, only different. Different because I didn't really want any similarities with her.

"Who are you?" I paused. Far enough away from the octagon, but close enough to shoot her if I had to.

"I'm... maybe you should talk with Kaius." She swung her long leg over the railing, jumping down onto the floor in front of me. Up close, I could see the sprinkle of freckles over her nose. She was beautiful. She was totally Kiznitch something.

"I'm asking you since I found you here—" I sidestepped when she tried to dodge me. She chuckled. "And this is one of my homes."

"So it is." She rolled her eyes and shoved past, collecting a duffel bag near one of the hanging punching bags. She turned at the last minute. "You're definitely Cartier, from all of this—" She waved her hands up and down my body, and I spun around to chase her when the door slammed in my face.

Pulling out my phone from my pocket, I hit dial on Kaius.

"Cartier." His voice usually calmed my frantic thoughts. So calm and collected, there had been times where he would make me feel stupid for being so erratic.

This wasn't one of those times.

"I just found a woman downstairs. Who the fuck was she?"

"That isn't of importance right now, Cartier. If it was, you would have known about her. I'll be sure that doesn't happen again." The line went dead.

She finishes off the final sentence and looks around the room.

Sass had moved closer while she was talking, and she's the first person to ask a question. "Who was she? I want to know who she is."

"I don't know. Kaius never told me, and I never asked again."

"Why not!" Perse this time.

"Because." Cartier looks up at where she stands in the kitchen, puffing the same joint Kyrin was. "Part of my training is obeying The Fathers. I cannot challenge them, and when I do, it won't be because I found a hot bitch using my gym." My eyes shift to King, who is already staring right at me.

I tap Cartier on the thigh. "I need to get changed. Stay here." Moving through the lounge, I make my way upstairs and slip in and out of the

shower, before throwing on a pair of slacks, a white shirt, and a black jacket beneath my leather one. By the time I make it back downstairs, everyone is ready to go and Cartier is still pounding down alcohol.

I take the glass out of her hand and place it on the kitchen counter.

Tonight isn't going to go well. I can fucking feel it. We all can. And it has nothing to do with what we have planned... or does it?



Swinton

Cartier

Even for Kiznitch, this place is over the top. There's a pool at the front of the house, where steam floats up and evaporates into the dark sky. Luxurious cars are parked on either side of the driveway, ready to go if anyone needs to get out fast. Keaton has been quieter than usual after I told them all about my suspicions with The Fathers. For years, since seeing that girl, I've gone back and forth on whether or not I should say anything to The Brothers. Their loyalties have always been to Kiznitch, and you don't get much more Kiznitch than The Fathers. Keaton has been whacking off people for them since I can remember. He's a damn robot, programmed to comply.

I step out of the car, clutching my gown in my hand. The fucking stupidity of always needing to dress up for these things is yet another subject I'd like to argue about. But not tonight. Tonight I'll look pretty and hope I'm wrong.

Music saunters through the wide opened doors, some classical piano piece I don't recognize. The house belongs to Kaius, and unease crawls down the back of my spine.

Two men stand guard on either side of the entrance, both in suits as dark as the sky, and with machine guns strapped to their sides. A car pulls up behind us and I turn, just in time to see Jordan and Christopher slide out and jog their way up the stairs. Even though I have The Brothers around me, it's still good to know that they're both here. Two people I wouldn't second guess.

Two people who know everything I know and have kept it quiet.

Jordan and Chris stand on either side of me, slightly in front, and size up the guards at the door. It's painfully obvious how much bigger mine are to these two, and then with The Brothers behind, the guards wouldn't have a chance.

"Good evening, gentlemen." I smirk up at them, choosing the one to my right to tease. I place my hand over his hard chest. "Such a lovely evening, isn't it?"

He pulls away from me politely and steps backward. "Indeed. The party is in the garden at the back."

I trail around him. "Of course, it is." With Jordan and Christopher beside me, I try to put some distance between The Brothers so I can hunt down Kaius, or any of The Fathers to ask them what the fuck is going on.

Only I don't have to.

The double doors that open to the garden area at the back are spread wide open. There are little fires lit around the place, and a bar that's to the left. Flowers bloom around the chairs and tables, and right near the front is where The Fathers and Mothers are seated around a long rectangular table. Movement behind them catches me off guard and I watch as four couples perform live sex.

I sigh. "You know. I hope we don't get like this with age."

"Welcome, our little prodigies!" Kaius widens his arms and stands from the chair that's tucked beneath a wide tree that branches over the tables. Small pieces of cakes and savories are lined out aesthetically on the table, sprinkled with pink and white flowers between. "How lovely to see you all..."

"Mm-hmm," I murmur, swiping a champagne flute from a passing naked waiter.

Kaius' eyes fall to me. Before my mother can say anything, he interrupts, "Always a pleasure, Cartier."

"For some." I grab my mother around the waist and kiss her cheek.

“Cartier, something’s wrong,” she whispers in my ear so only I can hear. “Smile so they don’t know I’m saying anything.” My smile widens and I take a long drink of the bubbles to cover my mouth.

“I missed you too, Mama,” I mouth, keeping up appearances until Kaius loses himself in conversation with Keres.

Kyrin squeezes Mom’s hand before rounding both of us, obviously sensing that we need a distraction.

“Stay close to me. I feel like something is off,” she continues. “Kaius has been difficult these past couple of days.” I finally step out of her embrace but hover close.

“So what’s this meeting for?” King announces, and we all migrate to the giant table in the center of the courtyard. The Four Fathers are down one end, with their women beside them, and Mama is beside me before our end blends. She’s right. Something is off. Keres and the other Fathers look distant, but confused. As if they’re hanging on edge.

Kaius sits at the head of the table on one end, and King on the other. It’s like looking at two men who should be the same person, but aren’t. Kaius, I’ve always thought had the best interest in all of us at heart, but over the years, I’ve come to realize that’s not the case.

“I have a proposition,” Kaius announces, and I lower my glass below my lip.

“Figured as much, Father. What is it?” King gestures to the table, hurrying him along. I turn to face King, but I’m met with Keaton, who makes sure to sit directly beside me.

“What?” I whisper, painfully aware how close he is.

He leans into the side of my throat. “When I say run, you run.” He opens the palm of my hand with a set of keys and closes them again.

When he leans back to search my eyes, panic whistles through my mind. Scenarios and possibilities start chasing me and my throat closes up. What the fuck does he mean, run? I’m not fucking running anywhere.

“I need The Dolls and Maya and Val.” Kaius’ voice breaks through any and all other conversations.

“Absolutely fucking not!” I snap, glaring at him from my spot. I toss the keys back in Keaton’s lap and I hear him let out a low growl. “For what, Kaius? What could you possibly need them for?” I stand from the table, done with sitting here like I have a target over my chest, waiting to get shot.

I walk around the end of the table, standing behind King. “Why, Kaius?”

Kaius shifts his focus to me and the table falls quiet. “Don’t forget your role, Cartier.”

“Oh, I haven’t.” I lean forward just enough. “But that wasn’t the area you trained me on, was it?” I continue around the table, slowly making my way to their side. I stop behind Kallisto, patting his head. “So tell me. Why the fuck are you needing our girls?”

Kaius’ face turns dark. His eyes more hooded and his lip sneering in arrogance. “Because we have another crew.”

“You *what*?” King grinds out, so low I almost miss it.

“And guess who runs it?” Kaius looks to Perse. “Little Dove Hendry.”

A chuckle vibrates from my chest. “You smug bastard. That goes against the rules.” I can’t say I’m surprised about Dove. Somehow, she has managed to spin herself into a web within The Fathers. Her anger toward all of us is deep-rooted, and nothing and no one can pull those weeds out. Even Kenny, who is Kaius’ loyal lap dog, seems to sit quietly in the corner. I imagine not for long because Kenny is a lot of things, but quiet isn’t one of them.

“Well, lucky for us—” Kenny finally stands up from his chair near all the sex, coming toe-to-toe with me. I block Kenny out of my mind a lot of the time. “The people who made them are dead.” It’s obvious how quiet the other Fathers are, and The Mothers; had Kaius pushed them too far too?

A gun cocks, tearing through the tension in the air, and I don’t have to look to know where it came from. I straighten my shoulders and bat my lashes up at Kenny, a false sense of strength pulling me through like a puppeteer on a string. “Hmmm, what do you think, Kaius?” I don’t take my eyes off Kenny. His dark hair slicked back, showing his sharp widow’s peak. “Is now also a good time to tell Keaton that Kenny was the man who trained me in sexual manipulat—” A gunshot rips through the air and bloody brain matter sprays all over my face and chest. I reach up to swipe the goo from my eyes. “Great. Just great, Keaton.”

“You little fucking shit!” Kaius roars, pushing up from the table. Everyone else is silent as I quickly launch forward and reach for the knife between my tits, swinging my arm around Kaius in a headlock with the knife against his throat.

“Now, now—” I smirk up to where Keaton stands, holding two guns. One directed at Kaius, and the other at Keres. “You and I both know Keaton isn’t exactly little.”

“Cartier—” Klaus slowly pushes up from the table with his arms raised. “You don’t want to be doing that. None of you have what it takes to kill your own fathers.”

“Hmmm—” King and Killian both murmur. I watch as Lilith slides out from beneath the table, making it known that she too is ready to jump when needed. “I don’t know about that. I’m pretty sure there have been some details we’ve been left out of. One, being what Cartier just said then—new crew aside.” King brings his eyes to mine, and I watch as they soften for me. “What else did they make you do?”

“Killian.” The only name I have to say, and everyone knows what I’m demanding.

Kill moves swiftly around the table, and I watch as The Mothers and Fathers follow his movement with horror.

“You can’t do this!” Kaius wails from beneath my knife. “You signed a blood oath, just like Delila did, as did who was before her!”

“I’m not Delila, Kaius! I thought we got through this already.” I tug the knife farther into his skin without breaking it.

Killian stands beside me, and Lilith is on the other. She takes the knife from my grip and presses it even farther against Kaius’ throat. “Hi! I’m Lilith. I don’t like old men like you very much, so I can’t promise that my hand will stay steady and I won’t *accidentally* slice your throat.” She giggles, her manic eyes widening. “Whoops!”

I look up at Killian, nodding. “Go at it.”

I didn’t know why I needed to be here. At this house. Kaius’ house was big, extravagant, and private. I’d heard of a lot of nasty shit that would go on with The Fathers, but I never paid close attention. Until now because I had to.

I climbed the stairs as Jordan and Christopher followed behind me.

“What is this training for?” Jordan asked from the step below, as I followed the instructions from the text message I received earlier.

“I don’t know. I kind of am just going with it.” It’s still only my first year.

"You're only in your first year, so it can't be that much," Christopher added, just as I reached the final step. I looked down the hallway and counted the rooms. Two large wooden doors sat at the end, and I knew that's the one I had to go through.

"I don't know. I've already killed someone, learned to fight, ran maths that I never knew existed, and learned some type of weird hacker coding shit. What else is left?"

My hand rested on the handle, and Christopher's came to mine.

"Sex."

"What?" I looked at him over my shoulder. "I know how to have sex. How is that important?"

"Cartier, you're the embodiment of Midnight Mayhem. Sex is important." His words stuck to the back of my mind like glue, and I swallowed past my nerves.

"If you do not want to do this, we will leave."

"It's not about what I want, Jordan. It's what I have to do. We all have our roles, and I guess this is now mine."

I looked behind his shoulder, down the long corridor. I could see King's room and where we played as kids. Who would have thought I'd be standing here tonight, possibly about to walk into his father's room to fuck him?

I pushed the doors open onto Kaius, but he wasn't the only one in the room. There was another man standing in the corner, shirtless and wearing nothing but slacks. He was skinny, tall, and not all that attractive. "Afternoon, Cartier." Kaius was the first to greet me. He always was. "I am so glad you made it."

I didn't have a fucking choice.

Closing the door behind me, I leaned my head against it. "No offense, Kaius, but I don't want you touching me." He chuckled a little before moving across the room. Pouring a glass of whiskey from the small bar, he gestured to the bed.

"Remove your clothes, Cartier. We're here to help you." I wished I could turn back time and be back outside with Jordan and Christopher. I was not ready for this. No way! Spinning around, I squeezed the handle in my hand and went to pull it back open and run, but a hand slammed over the wood, keeping it closed.

I closed my eyes as bile rolled up my throat at the proximity of Kenny behind me. His lips touched the nape of my neck and I shivered from my

skin crawling. "We've got you all night. We will start with the basics." His finger came to the base of my spine. "Don't speak." He moved me across the room with my hand, pushing me onto the bed. I fell down in a thump. All I could focus on was the pattern on the ceiling above. Deep swirls indented into the plaster and flowers erupted outside of it. He started to remove my clothes, but I didn't move.

"Cartier," Kaius said, and I turned my head back when his shadow fell over my face. "You need to participate. You know the rules." Fuck the rules. I didn't want this. I didn't want men touching me that I didn't approve of. I didn't want Kaius' hands all over my body, touching me in the same places Keaton's did.

"Okay," I whispered, swallowing past the lump that had formed in my throat. I could do this. It's part of it. I was Kiznitch. I was strong as fuck. My lip trembled when my jeans were being removed and a finger glided down the slit of my vagina. I wasn't strong. I could feel myself slowly crumbling around him as every second passed. I didn't want to breathe because I'd breathe their air.

Someone crawled up my body, hovering over the top of me and blocking the view of the ceiling. Kenny. "I'm going to fuck you to see what you've got, and then we'll work on other things like..." His fat penis rammed inside of me and I wailed a little, tears prickling the corner of my eyes. He drew out. "...how to use sex as a weapon. How to harness the pain people give you and use it to strengthen your mind." He jack-knifed inside of me relentlessly, and when I reached up to swipe the tears from my eyes, I hit Kaius' leg with the back of my hand. Peering up again, I watched him standing above me, stroking himself in his hand.

"Open your mouth, Cartier."

"I don't—" He shoved himself inside my mouth before I could say my next words and I cried around him. Caressing the front of my throat with his thumb, he continued to coo me as they both drew inside and outside of me. How did I not know that this was what happened? Maybe this was why Delila was the way she was. Time went on. They threw me around, changed positions, and after Kenny spilled inside of me, Kaius released himself over my body and they both fell back onto their chairs, bodies sweaty and breaths heavy.

I stayed. Quiet. Numb. My choice was taken away, that's what they taught me.

There was a knock on the door before it opened and a large shadow came into my peripheral. Turning my head, I locked onto Bam Bam.

He stopped inside the door, looking between Kaius and Kenny and me, before he kicked the door closed behind him.

Oh no.

I fall into Killian's arms as the memory fades out, squeezing him around the waist.

He remains passive, one arm locked tightly around my body as if he's scared I'm going to run away. "Rape? You and that piece of shit raped her?"

"What!" Kyrin launches forward and Kohen catches him by the wrist to try to stop him, but Kyrin swings around and punches him straight in the nose. All hell breaks out behind me and King grabs Keaton by the back of the collar, but I stay in the same spot. Unable to move. Killian dragging his talons down a memory I never wanted to remember felt like I'd been dropped into the pits of hell. I need to stay near Killian until my mind has caught up. I didn't want to relive that memory alone, so for once, I'm thankful for the gifts that are passed down like a generational curse within Kiznitch.

I've never felt Killian so frozen. So sure. "Kill them all."

"Killian..." Kaius blinks, and I feel myself warm to my surroundings. I'm safe. I'm with my family. *I'm safe.* I stand straight, slowly releasing from his body.

Killian turns back on me, his hands on my cheek. "Can I share with them what I saw?" Guilt slams into my chest, but I slowly nod. "Were any of the other Fathers ever involved with this?" Silence falls around us. Suddenly, no one is arguing or fighting, and Kaius isn't yelling. "Because we'll kill. Them. All." The strong smell of blood still clings to my nostrils. Do I want more? I'm not good with blood, or bodies, or death in general. I don't handle it as well as The Brothers or Lilith.

Sass and Perse stand behind Lilith now, with King directly behind Keres, awaiting orders. "How many were there?"

Killian raises his eyes up at King before whispering, "Just Kaius and Kenny, but Bam Bam did walk in at the end." I freeze at the mention of Bam Bam.

King looks at his father. "You betrayed the family unit that Kiznitch prides themselves on."

“It is part of her training, son. That’s what they all had to—”

“—we are not *fucking* Patience!” King roars, and I swear birds drop dead from the trees behind us. Among the chaos, I turn back around to see those same people still having sex. I seek out Jordan and Christopher, who waltz back down into the courtyard, cleaning blood off their blades. Who the hell did they just kill? I nudge my head toward the naked sex show, and Jordan and Christopher both give me a firm smile in agreement and begin escorting the couples out. Hopefully not to kill them. *Shit, will they kill them because they’ve seen too much?*

Kaius’ shoulders straighten as he flicks his suit up proudly. “If you kill me...” My eyes snap to his. “You’ll never see Eli again and he *will* die.”

My world stops. “What?” I take a step closer to him, but an arm is around my waist, pulling me against a hard chest with a protective hand pressed against my stomach. My muscles relax into the familiar touch, but it’s too late because now I want answers. “What the fuck has Eli got to do with this?”

Kaius peers up at me, shoving Lilith away so hard she lands on her ass, and slowly lowers himself to the chair he was on. His wrinkled fingers curl around the goblet as he slowly lifts it to his mouth. “Oh, it has everything to do with the little King.” He points to the chair beside him. “All of you, sit the fuck down.”

Keaton kisses my head, directing me to the chair at the end of the table. Everyone is a blur because my eyes are murky still from tears and blood, but I cling to him like he’s the only clarity I’ll ever have.

He gently places me on his lap as Kaius starts talking. “Eli didn’t leave to protect Cartier.” He leans back in his chair, shrugging. “Well, he did, but didn’t. He actually left for three reasons. One, was because Dominic did indeed want Cartier...” Kaius pauses, his eyes zeroing in on Keaton and Kyrin. “For, let’s just say, reasons.” I feel Keaton stiffen beneath me, as if a silent warning passed over his skin. “But the other reason was because there’s a war brewing, and Dominic has been targeting Kiznitch for as long as I can remember. What he is now lacking, since we took out Patience, is an ally—and that’s where Eli comes in.”

“What the fuck are you saying, old man, and I’d choose your next words very carefully because Lilith’s trigger finger isn’t as patient as the blood that pumps through her veins,” King warns.

Kaius stares at all of us. “The Kings. They’re who Dominic wants. The Kings know this, and they planted Eli in with him, much like he did with us.”

“The Kings wouldn’t turn on us,” King murmurs, leaning his elbows on the dining table. “So what other lies you got?”

“But you’re wrong. The Kings take care of their own, and they do it well.”

“Lucky for them.” I sneer at Kaius, grinding my teeth. God, but I hate this man. Leaning against the table, I move the drinks out of my way. “So how are you going to help us get Eli back?”

“Son...” Kingston’s mother speaks, breaking the tension. She pauses before continuing. “This has been hard for us all. He didn’t do this with Delila, your grandpa didn’t either. It’s all a lie, son.”

King slowly stands from the table, and I watch as his shadow spreads over the wood. It happens in slow motion. Kingston’s hand finds a knife on the table, and in two seconds he flings it across the space and it stabs straight between Kaius’ eyes. They widen in shock for two seconds, before I watch the life slowly bleed out of them.

“That’s a Father gone. *Poof*. Just like that.” King’s tone is low and challenging. Everyone quietens. “From now on, you don’t mean shit. Everything is run by *us* and what *we* say goes.” King falls back onto his chair, picks up a bottle of whiskey, and stares blankly at his father’s corpse. King worshipped him. He loved him as much as any son loved his father. Guilt rips through me when I realize part of why he did this was for me.

“King, I—”

“It wasn’t just for you, Cartier.” He looks around at Keres, Kian, Kallisto, and The Mothers. “There’s an order that we all must follow and he didn’t. We couldn’t trust him. Is there anyone else we can’t trust here tonight?” Silence. He leans back in his chair. “Good. Now I’m getting drunk.” Pushing away from the table, I watch as he disappears inside, stopping to say something to Jordan and Christopher briefly before continuing.

“Should you go follow him?” I ask Keaton.

He turns to face me, using his thumb to swipe the partly dried blood off my cheek. “Nah, I need to be with you.” My heart trips over its valves when he grabs me by the ass and spreads my legs over his lap, placing a kiss on my lips. “Baby?”

“Hmmm?” I ask, burying my fingers in his hair. I feel his cock harden against my clit and I fight a groan.

His eyes search mine, his brows pulled in. It looks cute, seeing Keaton with such a gentle look on his face. “You want me to kill the others who knew what they did to you?” His voice is so smooth. He could have been asking me about my favorite color.

My fingers pause, and I connect them behind his wide neck, sighing. “No. I trust that you guys will do what you’ve got to do from now on.”

“Mmmm, true.” He leans in and kisses me so gently that it kills all the butterflies he had planted inside of me all those years ago, leaving their ghosts behind. “We need to go check on him, but first, I think it’s time to gather up the weapons and storm Dominic Stranger once and for all.” Kyrin surprisingly ignores Keaton’s PDA. He’s still talking with Killian, and I know what their conversation is about. My memory.

“I agree,” Lilith pipes in, and I finally pry Keaton’s hands off my body to turn around and face our friends. I wriggle my ass into his crotch and a hand flies to my hip, squeezing roughly. As soon as Keaton has seen what Killian is going to show him, I know he’s going to need an outlet. “What are you thinking, Car?” Lilith adds.

“Well.” I run circles around the end of my glass. “I’m thinking we need to do that, but we also need to sit down with The Kings and go over where they stand. I’ve already set up a meeting with Bishop that’s happening in Kiznitch in two days, so after we all perform the blood oath, we can do that together. Then we can get Eli back and burn everyone to the ground.”

Kyrin’s looking back at Keaton now, his eyes slightly narrowed. God. When is he going to give it up, and what is his actual fucking problem? He’s taking it worse than even I imagined, and I imagined it pretty bad.

“The show must go on here, so I’ll stay behind with Perse and make sure everything runs smoothly. Where are we flying to after this?” Saskia flips open her clutch and takes out her phone. “To Greece? We’ve never done Greece before!”

“I know.” I wiggle my eyebrows at her from behind my glass. “Figured we should change that. It also gives the crew a big distraction and gets them away from any crossfire.”

Sass sighs, touching her hand to her heart. “I love Greece. I have an inner slut that comes out whenever I’m in Mykonos. I call her Mykonos Mik, and—”

Killian's hand is over her mouth. "The only slut you'll be is mine. Shut the fuck up."

Keaton's laughter shakes my body. "Okay, it's settled." I cross my leg over the other. "Saskia and Perse will stay behind to run the shows, and we will fly to Kiznitch to handle this problem. When we get back, we will organize Greece and get everyone there for Mykonos Mik. Try to keep it under wraps. I don't want others finding out."

Sass nods like a little child just being told she can have a second piece of cake. "Don't worry, we have enough help. I'm sure we can get a set to fill in for The Brothers too."

Killian pulls her into his chest and sucks her whole ass mouth into his. "You're sexy as fuck with murder around you."

She shoves him away. "First of all, don't bring your weird killer vibes near me, it doesn't go with my outfit, and second of all, it's not good for the preg—" We all gasp.

Killian rolls his eyes, tscking and tossing his arms in the air. "Two days, Saskia. Two fucking days ago you found out, and I told you to wait until you were six weeks."

"Oops." She didn't even look upset.

My hand is covering my mouth before I laugh, shaking my head. "Congratulations. Wow. A mini Killi—" I pause, memories flashing behind my eyes of Kill as a kid. "God help us all."

Keaton taps my thigh. "Hop up. I need to check on King and call clean up."

Sliding off his lap, his tatted fingers catch mine for the longest seconds before they finally drop and I watch as he disappears into the house. The carnage from tonight is a lot, but I've also known it was coming.

"Cartier, can we talk?" King's mom approaches, but mine steps between King's mom and me, her hand flying straight to her throat. "You will never come near my daughter unless she specifically summons you, and I said summoned, Dhalia."

"Mom..." I bring my hand to her arm reassuringly and she turns over her shoulder, unshed tears now running free down her cheeks. "It's okay."

"No, it's not, honey. I—I have failed you so often, and I will not let this happen again."

"You didn't fail me..." I choke on my tears. After everything that has happened tonight, I haven't put a second thought into the other Mothers.

Not even Dhalia and I believe her when she says that she didn't want anything to do with Kaius.

"Okay! So I'm over this!" Lilith grabs me by the arm and pulls me to my feet. Her lilac eyes fly to Sass. "Come on. We're leaving. This party sucks, and I need to blow off some steam since I know Eli is coming back any day now."

"In this?" I grab at my gown. "No. Best I can do is a Midnight Mayhem party."

"Fine." Lilith's eyes roll to the back of her head. "Then let's go. Perse will need some time with King anyway, and I need to get drunk. Sass can drive us since she wanted to put Killian's sperm inside of her."

Sass stares between both of us, and then to Kill. Kill nods in approval. "Yeah, because I know Jordan and Christopher go wherever Cartier does."

We make our way through the house as Jordan runs off to get the limo. We all stand on the curb of the driveway in silence.

"Tonight was weird." I'm the first to say something because I know they won't.

"It was..." Sass' voice sounds strained. "I kind of hoped the murder and death would be in the past."

I reach for her hand and slide my fingers between hers. "Will be soon. Just one more army to take care of."

"Was King close to his dad?" she asks just as the black car pulls up in front of us.

I open the door and gesture for them both to slide in before me. "No, but King loved him in his own way." Shutting the door behind me, I settle into the back seat and put my belt on. "Which is why I feel so bad."

"I don't think he'd want you to feel bad," Sass murmurs, grabbing a water bottle from the side fridge. "I think King never does anything without thinking it through hundreds of times. He meant to kill Kaius tonight, and I think The Brothers know why."

Lilith is already popping open a bottle of Don Julio. I bring it down to the fact that she's a mom now, and I don't know. I feel like if there's ever a reason to drink, it should be the fact that you birthed a whole entire human.

"You think they walked in knowing they were taking out Kaius and Kenny?"

Sass nods, turning to look out the side window when the car pulls away to take us back to The Village. "I do." I wonder if she's right. If that could

be possible. She is right about one thing; King truly doesn't do anything without thinking it through, so did they know what Kaius was doing? Was there another reason why they knew they had to kill him?

The endless thoughts settle in the back of my mind as I take the half full glass of tequila that Lilith is handing me.

"Okay, can we not talk about all of that? I—" She takes a long sip of hers. "Since Eli has been gone, I've felt like a whole part of me has been paralyzed. Like I'd lost the will to breathe, but did it anyway because I knew I had Luna and Ky." We both stay quiet. This is the first time Lilith has ever spoken about Eli, and both Sass and I know that it may not come around again. "He and Kyrin are both my twin flames. We all burn as one, so when I thought Eli was dead, I felt like half of my flame somehow turned to ice." Her eyes bore into mine from across the car. "Do you know how that feels? To not want to exist anymore, but I have other reasons to live for? Anyway, when you gave the greatest gift back to me by telling me he was still alive, I felt that—" She taps her chest over her heart, but her smile darkens. It's the old Lilith taking back hold of her. "Spark burn back to life. I want this. Him, Kyrin, Luna, my family, and I'm going to kill whomever gets in my way."

I lean forward and clink my glass to hers. Sass raises her water bottle.

"Cheers to more bodies dropping."

Lilith laughs. "As the old saying goes, may they all rest in pieces..."

We get back to The Village, and I promise the girls I'll have a shower and then be down, but after scrubbing all the blood off and slipping into plush wool pajamas, I don't want to move from my bed. I stare blankly at the TV hanging on the wall opposite and wait for the door to open downstairs. I want him to come here when he gets back. I want to see that distant feral look in his eyes because I haven't seen it in so long. Maybe that makes me a bad person. It probably does. But Keaton exists within darkness so that I can be the light to guide him home.

Minutes turn into hours, and it's not until three a.m. flashes over my alarm clock that I feel my eyes turn heavy. I wriggle deeper into my covers and close my eyes. He'll be here in the morning.



I press the number to fourteen and the speed to nine. My arms swing back and forth as my feet slap against the belt of the treadmill. My playlist today is a little older. I need the distraction of familiarity to push me through.

He never came to my room last night.

I haven't seen him all day. Maybe he blew off some steam with The Brothers, or went for a ride, or maybe King exploded and they needed to calm him down. Whatever the reason is, I know I'm acting like a total mundane stressing over it.

I keep my eyes locked on the mirrored wall, watching the muscles on my body flex as I push through the fatigue. The gym at The Village is all state-of-the-art. Licked with black paint over the walls, neon lights rim the edges of the equipment and skirtings so that if you wanted, you could train in the dark. It helps with our coordination in the tent. My legs begin to wobble like Jell-O and I jump off the side, swiping my head with my towel as my phone starts blaring in my hand. Kyrin's name flashes over the screen.

Not fucking Keaton.

"Yes, Brother?"

"Sorry about not checking in on you last night. Keaton slept outside your bus, but he's—he took it rough. Maybe I was—" He pauses, and I know what he's trying to say, but his pride won't allow him to say it. He clears his throat. "About tonight. What do I have to do to make you stay behind?"

I laugh, and then hang up on him, pushing my phone back into my back pocket when he tries to call back. He insults me every single time he does this. The constant undermining me.

Pushing through the entry doors to the gym, I pick up my pace back to my bus, not wanting to see anyone else. I need a distraction or this is going to drive me insane. As soon as I'm home, I grab my phone out of my pocket again as I move through to the master bedroom, turning on the shower. He doesn't want to text me? Fine. But I need to at least know he's okay.

Me: Where R u?

Shoving off my tights and sports bra, I fling them into the corner of the bathroom and slip under the hot water. I go through the motions of washing my body when my phone vibrates on the counter. My heart skips a beat and I reach out blindly to grab it, only fingers connect with mine. I pull away

instantly and peek around the corner, sighing when I see Keaton sitting in front of the bathroom sink.

“What’s wrong?” Blood stains his face and hands like paint does an artist. He rests his head against the cupboard as his leg slides down, his elbow resting on the other. He moves to the side, before looking back at me, and when he does, it’s like he punches me in the gut and leaves me hollow and heavy.

Stepping out of the shower, I bring my hands to his face and watch as the dried blood turns back to liquid and trickles down my arm. “I’ll wash you.” Memories fight their way to the surface, but I force them down. Not because he’s unlovable with them, but because he needs me right now and reminiscing isn’t helpful.

He staggers to his feet, almost robotic, and I grab his soiled shirt from the bottom, pulling it over his head. When his hands fall back to the sides, I peer up at him below, but my eyes are heavy from fatigue. He’s staring down at me with a void so deep it almost looks endless. Pupils dilated, hair sticky with blood, and cheeks hollowed in like he has been fighting his restraint for too long. I take his hand with mine. “Keaton, it’s me.” Fiddling with his button, I flick it undone and pull his jeans down to his feet. “Lean on the counter so I can take your shoes off.” My body shivers when the air touches it, but I focus on the job at hand... like I have many times before.

His hands squeeze the basin and I yank off both boots and socks before standing back to my full height and pulling him beneath the scalding hot shower. I leave him to stand beneath the water as I squirt soap into my hand and rub it over his chest. Over the tattoos—*one for each one*—and over the others I’m familiar with.

“Why?” The word is delicate as it leaves his lips.

“Why what?” I whisper, bringing my palm to his cheek and rubbing off the excess blood.

“Why do I always find myself back to you?”

I scrub the final mark off his lip. “Because even in your darkest moments, you know you can.”

He chuckles, and I look up into his eyes to find his pupils back to normal. Stepping into my body, his hands come to my ass at the same time his lips are on mine. He flips me around until I’m beneath the water, and I sigh when the hot droplets slip over my body. “How am I going to live without you?”

I press my forehead to his, rolling my hips over the tip of his dick and slowly sliding down his length. “You won’t ever find out.”

He growls gently over the side of my throat as I take him all in. “Ah, if only that was true, Tigger.” He thrusts into me hard but slow, pushing me farther up the wet tiled wall. His lips rest back onto mine as he continues the motion, sucking my tongue into his mouth and licking the rim of my lip. His hand is on my throat, but not enough to break me the way he likes to, more with reassurance that he could if he wanted to. His other hand leaves my ass cheek and comes to my nipple, twisting it hard between his fingers as he snaps down on my bottom lip so hard blood touches my tongue. “I’m a bad man.”

He pushes harder, so hard that I feel him collide with the beginning of my ovaries. “I know.”

He curls into my neck and sinks his teeth right over my vein. “But you love me anyway...” It’s so low I almost miss it and my heart drops to the floor. Because I do. I love him with all that exists within me. I’ve known that all my life, but this is the first time that it has been mentioned between us out loud.

His lips continue to rub against my damp neck and my body tingles. It’s like the words he uses get me drunk, and I don’t realize until it’s too late.

Two words. “I do.”

His arm slips behind my back, and he crushes me tight against his chest as he lunges deeper inside of me. Flipping around, he moves us out of the shower and places me on top of the basin, widening my legs. I lean against the large mirror behind me, placing one foot on the tub and leaving the other open.

He glides the tip of his finger down past my navel, stopping at my clit. I suck in a deep breath when he applies just enough pressure to make me convulse. “Promise me something.”

“Anything.” At this point...

He dips his finger down farther and circles my entrance. “You won’t let anyone come near you, even when I’m not.”

“Keat—”

“—answer me, Cartier.”

I glare at him, scratching the counter to stop myself from forcing him back inside of me. “We already had this conversation!”

He shakes his head while bringing that same finger to his mouth, his tongue lapping around the trunk as he sucks me off. “Nah, I need clarification.”

“Yes!” It isn’t a lie. If it’s not Keaton, it’s no one. I already know that. I’m too far deep to deny it, and I’m not stupid. I know how I feel about him and how my body and heart respond to him.

“Good.”

“Why!”

He leans down and curls his tongue around one nipple, and then the other, sending warmth straight to my core, before licking his way down to my pussy. Yanking my ass off the counter, he licks me once. “Because I haven’t turned off my switch, and I don’t want to hurt you.” He smirks up at me from below, and I fight myself to not roll my eyes. He is a dangerous man to everyone—everyone but me. It’s not romantic, it’s just the way it has always been. Before I can protest, he covers me with his mouth, and my hand flies to his hair to hold him in place. Licking circles around my clit, my chest rises and falls as I feel myself slowly building up that familiar euphoric tension that so famously explodes any time he’s around. Higher and higher, my heart rate skips beats as it tries to catch up with the build between my legs. Finally, he presses his tongue fully against my clit and forces it there as he moves his head up and down in a riding motion and I shatter all around him like a crack of lightning on a stormy night. My body jerks and shudders as the orgasm slowly subsides and he stands to his full height. His eyes search mine, dark against blue as he brings his finger to my cheek, running it down the same way a tear would drop. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I ask around my huffing breath.

The corner of his mouth turns upward, but his eyes remain the same. “I guess you’ll see.”

Wrapping his arm back around my body, he lifts me off the counter and carries me out into the bedroom. The curtains are spread open, giving the full moon just enough light to still see the outline of his sharp features that have been whetted with the blades of Greek gods. Dropping me onto the bed, he climbs over my body like a wolf would its prey until he’s directly over me and his swollen cock is pressing against my entrance. “We’re fucking until tomorrow night.”

“We are?” I ask, my lips curling behind my teeth. “Is that supposed to be a threat?” I realize the stupidity of my words after they leave my mouth.

His lips curve against mine when he dips down and takes my tongue between his teeth. “Fucking definitely.”

Past

I had my own fucking bike! Oh my God. Jumping on my brother, I squeezed him around the neck and forced my love into him like I had so many times before.

He chuckled against me. “Yeah, okay, chill.” Stepping back onto the ground, I rubbed my hand over the seat and wiggled my brows up at him. “Can we go for a ride together?”

“What, right now?” He swung his keys around his finger with a wide grin on his mouth. “I mean, I don’t see why not...”

In a loud howl of laughter, we both saddled up onto our bikes and I roared mine to life. I wanted to cry. And pee. But mainly cry because this bike was perfect. It had teal blue stickers where The Brothers kept all theirs black, but had their signature black base. I shoved my helmet over my head and pointed my fingers to the road before shooting forward and zipping past people passing through the valley and walkways that made up The Village. Excitement filled my chest so wide I could barely breathe as I shot through the clearing of the forest and bounced over the humps on the dirt path. I knew this path because I rode it before when I first stole Kyrin’s bike. Only this time, I knew exactly where I was going. I wanted to go down below because I had to see what that place was. It reminded me of a castle, like the one in Kiznitch, but more modern. I weaved and dodged fallen branches and trees, my laughter so loud I almost thought it could be heard over the loud two-stroke engines. When the hill came, I cut a right and took the path that went off road completely. I leaned up into a standing position and rode all the way down, hearing Kyrin right on my ass. He would know where I was going at this point, but he couldn’t stop me because it would be too dangerous. As soon as we leveled out, I hooked the handles to the right and my back tires kicked up in a cloud of dust as I tore off my helmet and placed it on my lap with a cheesy grin plastered on my face.

“Ah... maybe I am the better rider...”

Kyrin flung his helmet to the road and grabbed me around the arm, pulling me behind a tree out of sight. “How the fuck did you know about

this place?”

I tried to pull myself out of his grip, but it was no use. Kyrin always had me with a concrete grip. “Because I saw it when I stole your bike.”

He squeezed his eyes closed as footsteps sounded out behind him. My eyes shot over his shoulder and widened when they landed on Keaton. He was older than me and my brother’s best friend, but I firmly believed he had a thing for me. I knew it. Or... I created it in my head. He and I just... it was different than the bond I had with the other Brothers. It was as though he spoke to me without speaking to me, and I felt him without touching him. It was the most unusual thing, but always filled my body with a sense of familiarity. Even if he was staring at me like I just killed his cat.

“What the fuck is she doing here?”

My smile fell instantly to a scowl. “Well, so nice to see you too.” Yeah, I’m almost certain it’s probably always in my head.

It wasn’t until he dropped what he was carrying in his hand to the dirt ground that I took notice of everything else. The blood covering his hands, and a single splatter that was over his cheek. Without thinking, I took a step toward him, fear replacing the grip Kyrin had on me. “Are you hurt?”

Kyrin shoved me back against the tree, glaring between us. Keaton stared off into the distance, never paying me any attention. Like he didn’t come to me at times and need me to comfort him. Like he hadn’t crawled into my room all our lives and talked to me like I was a real person and not someone who needed to be protected. It was almost always when he had blood on him, so I figured I’d never ask questions unless he told me, and I’d do whatever he needed at that time to distract him.

“Why—wait, do you know?”

Keaton finally snapped and glared at my brother. “Of course, she fucking doesn’t.” He stormed past us, and I listened until the door of the house slammed closed. When my eyes finally reopened, Kyrin was staring at me with a hardened expression. “You’re going home. Right now.”

“But what’s that place?” I asked while shoving my helmet over my head.

Ky kick-started his bike. “A place you will never see.”

My muscles ache as my arm stretches out, falling on a cold spot on the bed. Last night was the first time we drowned one of his episodes with sex. To this day, I’ve never asked what it is he does, or why he needs me after,

but the blood is a giveaway. I know they kill people. They have to, but it's the *have to* that has always kept me questioning with Keaton.

I've never seen any of The Brothers as messy as he is afterward, or often. So either they hide it well from me or there's something else going on with him.

My phone vibrates on the floor and I clutch the sheet around my naked (and bruised) body, reaching for it and swiping it unlocked to see a FaceTime from Lilith.

"Child of Satan," I answer her, flopping back onto the bed until the feathers in my pillow curve around my head.

"Dracula's bride," she snaps back, moving her glasses down the bridge of her nose to stare at me with her unworldly eyes.

My mouth shuts and then opens. "Um... you know I hate how intuitive you are, right?"

She waves her hands around the place, and I hear Luna laughing in the background. "Monster brother isn't here right now." It has been good to see Lilith getting back to the woman we all met, knew, and loved. It's like seeing color form back onto the cheeks of a corpse. She and Kyrin are great together, sure, but it's too weird not seeing them with Eli.

"So, tonight is the night. I need help with what to wear."

"Lilith!" I whine, sliding out of bed and dragging my sheet with me. Flicking on the light in my closet, I brush through the clothes that are hanging on the hangers, stopping at a pair of high-waisted jeans and a black crop corset. *Hmmm. I could wear this, though.* Might not be so ideal since I can't fight in it properly, but maybe I'll just carry extra weapons. "Okay, no, you are right. I think I'm doing jeans and leather top."

"I want something slutty."

"Yes, we know."

"So..." She places the phone on the floor and a leather jumpsuit fills the space. It looks small and tight but totally hot.

"Immediately yes." My mouth spreads into a smile. "I love that. Are you leaving Noxy with Perse and Sass?"

She picks up the phone again and carries me to the kitchen. "Yeah. King is better today, but last night he was a mess, I heard." Her drinking coffee makes me thirsty, and I quickly check the bathroom before heading down the stairs to the main living area and checking the kitchen too.

“Okay, so what happened?” I play coy to hopefully get some info, placing my phone onto the counter and moving to the fridge. Grabbing the OJ, I bring it back to the phone and unscrew the lid.

“Well, Keaton, wait—you know about Keaton, right?”

I swallow the cool pulp and wait for the acidity to settle in my stomach. “Yeah.” I fall backward against the counter and close my eyes briefly. “I know.”

“Really?” Lilith asks, with way too much excitement in her tone. “Did he tell you?”

I shake my head, tapping against the counter. “No, never. I got the hints he left for me over the years of him using me as his bounce back.”

She sighs. “Well, it’s about your memory. They took it really bad and coped the way they all do, in their own ways.” Lilith pauses, tilting her head and studying me. I hate when she does this because it’s as though she has a sixth sense. She can see through people. Their lies, their secrets, and the decayed skeletons they try to hide in their closet. “Man.” Her head shakes from side to side. “That man loves you more than love loves itself.”

“Lilith!” I seethe, for what feels like the fifth time this morning. I lean onto the counter with my elbows. “He doesn’t. He has just always known that I accept him.”

“What do you think love is, Cartier?” She points to me through the phone. “But that also isn’t true. You and I both know it’s a lot deeper than that.” The main door opens and closes, and I quickly swipe the call to hang up on her mid-conversation. I love Lilith with all of my heart, but goddamn, if she isn’t a beacon for trouble. She’s the worst thing that can happen to me too because I don’t need any more attention for trouble.

“Hey!” I grip the edge of the sheet and watch as Keaton makes his way toward me, his chest glistening with sweat. “Gym?”

He leans down and grabs me on the ass cheek through the sheet and I wince from the bruising, but smile up at him as I kiss him on the lips. “Yeah.”

“What, I didn’t fuck it all out of you last night?” I bat my lashes up at him innocently as he pours coffee into a mug and drops a scoop of protein powder and milk into it.

“No, you did... but they came back this morning.” His eyes darken from looking at me behind his mug, and I hold down my smirk. I wonder if he’s ever going to admit to me what he does.

Probably not.

I often wonder if I would tolerate it if it was from another man, say a civilian, not in Kiznitch.

The answer is always no.

Always never.

I wish I could say why I accept it from Keaton but I wouldn't from other men. It probably has a lot to do with it's just a Keaton thing, but I'd be lying. It's a Kiznitch thing.

I place my OJ onto the counter again and reach behind his neck, wrapping my arms around him and leaning up on my tippy toes. "Can you stop being such an asshole to Jordan and Chris, please?" Distraction is the Band-Aid to pain.

He chuckles, but it's not deep enough to warrant anything further. His rigid jaw tenses slightly before he rests his forehead on mine. "Yeah, sure thing. Since I now understand how much they do want to keep you safe."

"They do that for me on a daily, Keaton."

"Yeah." Keaton turns and empties his coffee down the sink. "I am well aware of what your side boys do, Cartier."

"Oh really?" I ask, half-joking. "And how do you know?"

He turns back to me and looks me dead in the eye. "Because I fucked Delila enough times to meet hers."

"What?" I pull back from him, but he grabs me by the chin with his finger and thumb.

"Don't do that, Cartier. You know I've fucked people."

"Yeah..." My shoulders deflate. "But I wasn't expecting you to say her."

He shrugs, grabbing me behind the thighs and lifting me onto the counter. He spreads them wide and flicks the sheet off my body. "It was her only when it wasn't Draya."

"What?"



Eighteen

Cartier

I haven't thought much about what Keaton said last night, but the 'him losing me' thing has been playing on repeat in my head. I figure it's just Keaton being Keaton, but as we wait for the rest of The Brothers in the smaller private jet, I can't help but replay the words over and over like a shitty song that's too catchy to forget. Turning to face him, I remove an AirPods and search his side profile. The sharp line of his jaw and deep indents of his cheekbones. He has the perfect pointed nose too, and soft lips that curl around the edges. His dark hair only slightly falls over his forehead, touching his olive skin.

"Why did you keep saying that you were going to lose me last night?"

His eyes open lazily and he turns his head toward me, looking between my eyes and my mouth. It pains me when he does that because it's as though he's trying to think of what *not* to say when he knows he can tell me anything and it won't change how I feel about him.

"Because it's inevitable, Tigger."

I shake my head slowly, brushing my lips against his just enough to catch the breath that he breathes out. "No, it's not, because you could tell me that you do the worst thing in the world and I'd still love you."

His lips widen slightly as a hiss leaves him. “Don’t say that shit to me, Cartier.” He turns away from me, hiking his foot up onto the table in front of us.

“Why?” I don’t mean it to come out as loud as it does.

“Because you don’t know the half of what I do.”

“I’m pretty sure I do, Keaton...” I deadpan, reaching for the safety card on the table.

“Pretty sure you don’t, Cartier...” he mimics my tone, and I feel anger bubbling through me.

I open my mouth. “What? That you fucking kill people?”

His eyes shoot around the plane before landing back on me. “Shut the fuck up, Cartier. You and your big fucking mouth.”

I widen my eyes at him. “Well, it’s true.”

“Yeah, I’ve never hidden from you what I do for Kiznitch. If the recruits don’t comply, their family gets wiped out. Period. So what?”

I wait for a few seconds, memorizing the way his lashes fan out over his cheeks every time he blinks. The way his muscles on his face are relaxed and his shoulders are slightly hunched over. Flicking my tongue over the curve of my tooth, I nod. “Right, well, that *and* the fact that you kill for pleasure, therapy, and fun too...”

The easiness on his face freezes and his shoulders stiffen. Holding my breath, I wait for him to say the next words. Anything. Confirm or try to deny. The truth is, I worked it out a long time ago. At one point in Keaton’s life, he was coming to see me every day, with blood sprays still on him. It’s as though he would come to me, right after doing what he did.

“Are we ready to kill some motherfuckers?” Killian jumps through the door.

I rest back in my chair. “I’m around unstable people.”

Keaton leaves to the back of the plane, shoving through the curtains where the private room is. I don’t bother following. I know when to push and when to pull when it comes to Keaton, and right now, I need to do neither.

Killian looks between the swaying curtains and me. “Trouble already?”

“Trouble from the beginning,” I mumble, just as Kyrin and King enter from behind, with Kohen in tow and Jordan and Christopher. Kenan stumbles in behind them, with Keres and Klaus closely following.

“Well, this is not happening without me!” Kenan finds me instantly, pushing out of Jordan and Christopher’s way and falling down opposite. “Baby girl, I’ve missed you. Haven’t seen you much lately.”

“I know,” I say, peering out the window onto the tarmac. “It’s been a crazy time.”

Kenan’s brows pull in with confusion, his head tilting. “Wait, I mean, since you know”—he leans in closer, half of his mouth curving up when he says the next words—“that happened.”

I turn away from the window. “What—”

“Kenan, who the fuck let you in?” Keaton grabs my hand and places it on his thigh when he’s seated back down. I leave it. Part of loving someone like Keaton is accepting his demons.

Kenan’s wide-tooth smile wrinkles his cheeks, and I can’t help but chuckle. He’s infectious. Everywhere he goes, he leaves a sprinkle of happiness. “Well, someone needs to make sure Killian doesn’t die. Sass’ orders.”

“Me.” Keaton points to himself. “I make sure no one dies.”

“Mmmm.” Kenan’s lips curl around his teeth, his eyes squinting. “No offense, Drac, but we all know that you’d bathe in blood before you’d stop it from spilling.” Keaton tenses beneath my hand, so I gently massage it until he relaxes. “So! Where’s the alcohol? I plan to get drunk now, snort some coochie, and be all prepped for the red reunion.”

“You’re calling it the red reunion?” I raise my brow at Kenan.

“Everyone is. Be right back.” He disappears like a tornado of energy. So much for trying to keep it under wraps, but I should have known that news travels through like wildfire.

I shift to face Keaton, lifting my lips to his jaw to place a kiss on the sharp edge before running my tongue farther back near his ear. “Thought you could get rid of me?” It makes sense now. Kyrin, not wanting him and me to be together, had to do with Keaton doing what he does. Keaton saying he’s going to lose me. “Why would you think that would change anything between us?”

He laughs darkly, but it’s more sarcastic than anything. “Oh, how I wish it was that simple.”

Kohen sits on the other side of Lilith, and I watch as they both exchange a conversation. Everyone knows that Dove and Lilith are close, and have been for a long time. I never thought much about that until right now. We

still haven't addressed the other crew, I'm guessing we will be doing that when we get back, but what are her thoughts on that? What about how Kohen has known about this all along and not said a single word—or did he, and that's how King knew that night?

So much to unpack, yet all I've been focused on is Keaton and me. In hindsight, I know that's what my job is, but I really need to get better at looking over people. Delila knew what everyone was doing and when they were doing it. Fatigue trickles into the marrow of my bones. That sounds exhausting.

Kenan's back opposite us, lying flat with a glass of whiskey in his hand as the plane takes off. From New York to Kiznitch is about ten hours, since we're bypassing Bucharest and landing straight on home soil. I love everything about Kiznitch, especially during these months. December to March is winter, so the ground will be dusted in glowing white snow, and all of the high set ancient buildings will be iced gingerbread houses. I'm most excited to be back in Kiznitch and at The Castle, and less to see The Kings since I don't know what we will be walking in on. They've never been hostile to us before, but they take care of their own, much like we do. Sometimes a common ground with people is the same to start a war on.

Kenan quietens and I slide my AirPods back into my ears, pressing on "Need You Most" from The Kid LAROI. I know when I should fill silence with words and my presence when it comes to Keaton, and right now isn't one of those times. Especially after making it known that I know his darkest secret.

The flight continues until we're descending. I slide over to the window and peek down below, watching as the clouds separate around us. Kiznitch comes into view, the little town and famous bridge, and just above that, I see the stone castle built into the cliff side of a bank. Fuzzy warmth fills me inside when I see it. My childhood was spent here more than it was in New York. I guess it had a lot to do with my brother and him keeping me away from Midnight Mayhem, but I loved it. I played down the concrete halls and roasted marshmallows in the fireplace in my bedroom. Whenever Keaton was in Kiznitch, which at one point was a lot, he would visit me. It was never for long, and once I hit high school, I stayed in New York, which made it easier for him to come to me.

At all times.

Keaton's phone vibrates on the table, and out of habit, my eyes shift to the screen. A photo of a brunette girl with blood-red lips flashes over the screen and I watch his reaction to her. He swipes up his phone and unlocks to answer it, sliding out of the booth and moving to the back of the plane.

"That was weird," Kenan muses. I didn't realize he was awake because he had been so quiet.

"Was it?" I look directly at Kenan as he pushes himself up from lying down. "That coke might be shit. You slept the entire time."

"Ah, that's because I'm saving it for before the red reunion." Oh God. When will he stop saying red reunion?

"Was that weird?" I ask again, turning to face the back.

"She was hot," Kenan answers smoothly, and I glare at him. Kenan is a pretty creature when he's not moving his mouth. "If I'm being honest, you're probably both on the same playing field as far as looks are concerned, but did you read her name? She's Kiznitch through and through, which means she's most likely crazy as fuck. Like you too."

I ignore his comments and look at Lilith, who is already watching me. She taps her phone and I read her text on mine just as the plane's tires skid on the tarmac.

Lil: What is it?

Me: I don't know. Her name was Kissime and she had long dark hair and big lips. Kind of looked like Saskia. Fml.

Lilith: No one looks like Saskia. Bet she's just a Brother's groupie. Don't sweat it.

Me: Have you met their groupies?

My eyes fly up to see her reaction, and I have to choke on my laugh when her lip curls.

Lilith: No. Should we go find some?

Oh God. As soon as the plane stops, I push out of the booth and grab Kenan by the wrist to drag him out with me. If Keaton wants to stay behind and talk to his *Kissime*, he can do that. I won't be here waiting. Frustration and jealousy pool inside of me, and when it stirs, it roars.

"We'll meet you at The Castle," Ky says as I push past them all.

I smile over my shoulder. "Yes—" Winking at Lilith. "We will."

“I’m all for forced proximity, Ice Queen, but I’d prefer if you were naked while doing it,” Kenan mumbles as I fly down the stairs to the tarmac and take the first car I see. There’s a Lambo, a Porsche, a McLaren, a Merc, and a BMW, along with a few others for security and all of that. Keaton just loves that McLaren anytime he’s in Kiznitch.

Snatching the keys from the waiting driver standing beside it, I slip into the driver’s seat. “I don’t need a driver.” Kenan closes the passenger door and laughs as I fire the car up and feel it purr beneath my ass.

“Mmmm, no wonder he loves this car.”

Kenan opens his phone and clicks the camera app, swiping to the video. Kenan is widely known for his TikTok content with Midnight Mayhem. He actually has the most followers out of everyone because he posts the most content, and it’s *good* content.

He turns the lens onto me. “Our Ice Queen is disrupting the one and only—” The phone shifts, and I turn just in time to see Keaton stepping down the stairs and onto the tarmac. “Dracula... muaahahahaha!”

I drop it into first and fly out of the familiar airstrip before any of them catch me. “This feels good.” I inhale and sigh through the tension in my muscles. After all these weeks, I’ve been so focused on my duties that I’ve forgotten to live. To feel. To explore.

“Freedom looks good on you.” Kenan taps his arm with mine before playing with the touch screen to turn on the Bluetooth and connect his phone.

“You remind me of Eli...” I say, almost to myself. The words surprise me as much as him.

“Nah, he’s way hotter.” True, but I wasn’t going to agree out loud.

“You just give me the same feelings. Like—I’ve known you for a long time.”

Kenan watches me, his eyes flicking from the speedometer to my face. “Okay...” His reaction confuses me, but then we’re on the main strip of Kiznitch and I feel all the memories I left here soak back into my pores. The streets are scattered with people here and there, snow frosting the road and streets. There are little shops on every side, but directly in front of us, up against the stone clifftop, is The Castle that’s built into the cliff.

Kenan shuffles forward, pushing his glasses down the bridge of his nose to take a closer look. “Dang. It’s bigger than I remember.”

“Bet that’s what they all say...” I smirk over at him and he bursts out laughing, pushing his glasses back up.

“Okay, girlfriend. Tell me, are you upset that hottie called him, or are you upset that he took the call away from you?”

“Both! And I’m kind of... confused. I’ve spent so long making sure I’m the best version of Delila that she was, but forgot to be myself.”

Kenan hasn’t replied, so I turn to face him as we roll to the first set of lights. He’s blinking at me with a blank expression, before shaking it off and smiling like the Cheshire cat. “Go right. We’re so hitting Alley Cat before you go to The Castle.”

I look between him and the road ahead. “What? No, I can’t, I have to be present—”

“—and you will be!” Kenan clucks his tongue at me. “But I am your friend, not the whatever version of Delila you’re chasing, and as *your* friend, I’m telling you we need some Cartier Nero type shit before you go back and play boss bitch around a bunch of testosterone filled men who all have too much big dick energy and not enough sense.”

I burst out laughing, but falter when the light turns green. “Okay. One drink.”

I look in my rearview mirror and don’t see Christopher and Jordan behind me. Whoops. We must have sped all the way here. Turning right, I direct us down the road until the bright neon light flickers that reads *Alley Cat*.

As we pull up to the curb, faces turn toward the car from the line out the front. Every car for Midnight Mayhem starts with MM on the plate, not that you need that hint to know it’s us. Kiznitch is a wealthy town, but we are at the top.

“Well, it’s a good thing Kiznitch is safe, because I just lost my bodyguards.” We both climb out and Kenan laughs, closing his door.

I waltz past the front as the security officer manning the line notices us. We’re both dressed—well—I’m dressed more casually than I would if I was going out. The ripped jeans and crop top, no more than the Vans on my feet. Kenan looks good, though. Bright pattern shirt that has all of the pastel colors striped over each other in a hippie type pattern, and slacks with boat shoes on his feet. I swear, anything this man wears looks good.

The guard nods at both of us and unhooks the barrier. Not one person complains in line when we slip through and I slide some money into his

back pocket.

The music is loud, and even though it's not dark outside—despite it being nine p.m.—it's dark in here. Neon strobe lights flash to the heavy techno sound as people dance. Another man wearing a suit with tattoos all over his body and face moves toward us, gesturing to the stairs.

“Your booths are upstairs, if you want to foll—” I place my hand on his chest, tilting my head. I know I'm attractive. That part I didn't need training for, and I know how to use my femininity like a weapon, or at the very least, act interested for a little bit of attention.

“We don't want them. We're good down here!” I yell into his ear, standing on my tippy toes.

He looks between Kenan and me, before leaning closer in to me. “Look, I know that you're Kyrin's baby sister. He will have my balls if I don't tell him you've come into my club. So I'll give you a ten-minute head start.”

I sigh, running my finger over the buttons of his suit shirt. Damn. If I wanted to be a real bitch, I could very well use him as a new toy to annoy Keaton. Unfortunately, I don't think he's warranted that, and hopefully he never does. I lean into his ear again. “Actually, yes, that's right. I am his sister, but I'm *Cartier Nero*, so...”

It's the first time I've noticed that maybe his eyes are blue. Green? No. Definitely blue. You know what? Why the fuck is everyone in this damn town attractive?

“Alright, beat it, you two. I didn't see you.” His big body moves up the stairs, and I spin around to see Kenan already with his tongue down a girl's throat.

Chuckling, I swing near the bar and order ten shots. We don't have time for drinks, and I knew I was lying about just having one the second I turned the car down this street.

Kenan's arms wrap around my waist as he rests his chin on my shoulder. “You left me with her.”

I wink at the bartender, licking salt off my hand. “You looked busy...” Shooting down the tequila, I suck on the wedge of lime as Kenan shuffles his ass onto the bar. No one says a word. Midnight Mayhem has a bad rep whenever we come back to Kiznitch because we can be loud and obnoxious. Not usually The Brothers, but others. Like Kenan. Too bad if anyone has a problem with him tonight, they'll have to go through me. *Oh God... am I drunk already?*

Kenan wraps his lips around the rim of the shot glass and tips his head back. Swiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he presses his forehead to mine. “You know... I don’t think this is a one drink kind of party.” He reaches into his pocket, pulling out the little ball of white powder. “Hello, darkness...” The music changes to a familiar tune, and I snatch the bag off him while gesturing around the drinks. I tell the bartender that we’re heading upstairs and ask if we could get someone to move the drinks up before I drag Kenan back the way we came, taking the steps as fast as I can despite the shot of tequila in my blood.

I’ve never been upstairs before. I’ve been down once, and that was because I was desperate for space during a month-long trip here a couple of years ago. I sat at the bar and drank myself into a coma.

I pause when I see the owner staring at me from the corner of the room. The whole upstairs is made up of private VIP booths, lined with LED lights at the bottom of each seating. All of the booths overlook the club downstairs, and right now, there is only another group around where the owner is.

I gesture to the booth closest to us, and Kenan takes it as we lay what shots we have left on the table since we decided to carry them up.

A naked man who appears to be a waiter and wearing nothing but a bowtie around his neck with a skull hanging off, stops at our table, interrupting Kenan’s recording. I don’t even know when Kenan records for his daily vlogs, but I do know that I’ve had three shots of tequila and my cheeks are running hot.

The waiter smirks down at me and I hide my chuckle. Men. Such simple creatures. “Can I get you all new drinks?”

I lean over, touching the bowtie with my finger and running it down his chest. “Four more shots of Patron, please.”

The waiter, whose hair is tied in a messy bun on the top of his head, brings his eyes lazily to mine. “Sure. Anything else?”

I release him like I would a fish out of water. “Nope.” Dusting the salt on my hand, I lick it off while maintaining eye contact with him. “That’s all. For now.” The music blares in the background, and I’ve lost count how many shots we’ve had. Every now and then I feel the eyes of the owner on me, but it’s fleeting, like he’s not watching me for me, but for someone else.

I spread onto the chair as Kenan takes a line of coke that’s sprinkled on the table. The room is spinning, and when I close my eyes, it worsens.

“You’re up, Queen.” The rolled dollar bill slaps me on the forearm and I shift my eyes to look at him. Sweat is slicked over my face, alcohol cursing so fast through my body I’m seeing stars, and now Kenan is trying to feed me cocaine.

I shake my head, standing from the table. “I don’t need it anymore.”

He clears his nostril. “Must be so nice.”

“It is.” I widen my eyes at him from over my shoulder.

He licks up the remaining line and follows me as I dance my way downstairs. I can’t remember how long it has been since I’ve felt this free. Maybe before my training started. Around the time Eli was still in my life.

I swerve through the sea of people dancing, but any time they see me coming, they part. It’s as though they all try to keep a safe distance from me. Kenan follows close, pulling me into his chest. Grinding against him, we dance and sing song after song. It isn’t until my feet ache and my throat chips from dehydration that I finally drag him out of the club.

All laughter between us dies when I see Jordan and Christopher both standing near my car. “Oops.”

Jordan opens the back door and I pull Kenan in with me, where he stumbles on top, his cheek pressed to my cleavage.

Both of my men get into the car and pull away.

“You found me!” I tap the back of their chairs. “Was it hard?”

“No, Cartier, it wasn’t. The only McLaren in Kiznitch isn’t hard to find.” I push Kenan off my chest and he falls asleep in the chair, his head tilting against the headrest and his mouth opened slightly as he snores.

“I’m not apologizing to either of you. I’m in Kiznitch—” Leaning forward, I turn on the radio. “I’m safe here.”

“Cartier.” Jordan turns to face me. “We work for you, not with you, or the other way around. You don’t owe us anything. We just wanted to make sure you were safe. That is our job to do.” My mouth closes. I feel like an idiot. Damn alcohol. This is why I hate the stuff.

We start driving up the familiar steep hill that leads directly to The Castle. Little lights hang on the side of the road connecting healthy shrubs along the path. When we finally pull through the high wired gates and to the round entrance, stopping outside two large, old, stained doors, I push Kenan out of the opened door and he wakes, swiping the saliva off his mouth.

Laughing, I catch him with my arm while swiping my hair back with my fingers as the front doors swing open and Kyrin stands at the threshold,

pointing a finger directly at me with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“You! I swear to fucking God, you are fucking grounded.”

My mouth slams closed, and maybe it’s the alcohol, but laughter bubbles up my throat as I continue to carry Kenan up the stairs. “You can’t ground me. Nice work, though.”

“No?” Kyrin yells, and I turn around to cuss him out, only I’ve realized how stressed he looks. His hair is a mess, dark rims beneath his eyes. *God*. What is the time? “Maybe not, but I’ll tell you, Cartier.” He steps up the stairs, closing the distance between us. “Keaton can.” I shove away from him and move through the doors. I can apologize tomorrow when he’ll take it more seriously. Kyrin has never liked me when I drink. “Not that it matters, though!” he finally calls out, just as I enter The Castle. I can feel the heat from the lit fires and candles, but I turn around to face my brother anyway, because I get it. I get why he’s angry at me, but I’m just too drunk to care right now. “Since he’s not alone, and let me just say since it’s a topic we haven’t spoken on before.” Kyrin sucks down on his smoke before flicking it to the side and into the garden. I glare at him, annoyed at his laziness. “I will not come between whatever drama you and Keaton have. You wanna fuck a Brother, Cartier?” Kyrin’s mouth tilts up, his eyebrows dropping in and I know. I know he’s going to say something harsh. “Then by all means, Princess. You do that, but let me tell you one thing.” He flicks my forehead with his finger and anger explodes inside of me. What does he mean Keaton isn’t alone? “What do Brothers do well?”

Then he’s back inside and climbing the right wing of the twin staircase, leaving me speechless, drunk, tired, hungry, and angry all at once.

“He’s right—” Kenan slurs, and I hike him up my shoulder but then shift him to Chris and Jordan to direct upstairs. “You’re going to get hurt.” Kenan’s head tilts to the side. “And you chose the worst one.” I follow behind them as they drop Kenan into his room, before they both follow me to mine. Part of me wants to go and see Keaton, but I know I’d just keep drinking if I walked in on something I didn’t want to see, so instead, I find myself in my suite after climbing the round staircase that leads to my private quarters and slipping into a hot shower. As soon as the water hits my skin, I feel all the tension I was just feeling disappear. I may be twenty, but I cannot party like that, it would seem. Now with Chris and Jordan in their bedrooms below mine, I know I can truly relax. For one night. I need

orange juice. Isn't that what helps kick alcohol out of your body? And bread.

I need a burger.

After wrapping my hair in a towel, I slip into a short black silk robe and grab my phone, opening the Uber Eats app. "Starving." I order a whole bunch of burgers and fries and orange juice before checking the time. It's three a.m., and Bishop is supposed to be here tonight. Whoops. Yes. I shouldn't have gone out.

Gripping on to the handrail for dear life before the room tilts, I bang on Jordan and Christopher's door.

Chris opens it. "You okay?" He's wearing briefs and no shirt. He looks good. They always do. Too bad they don't know that I know they're sleeping together. I'm waiting for one of them to tell me, so I can elevate our friendship to the next level.

"I ordered us all burgers and fries. I'll go wait for them down—"

"—No. I will go." Chris disappears to grab a hoodie and jeans. "You wait in here with Jordan."

I smile up at him. "You're my—" High-pitched laughter distracts me from down the long concrete corridor. The Castle is old as fuck. We've upgraded what was necessary, but as far as decor goes, it remains very much intact to our great whatever ancestors and their royal family blood.

"What—" It sounds out again, and I turn to follow the sound when a hand is on my wrist, keeping me at the door.

"No. What are we not going to do?" Kenan isn't who I was expecting. He's showered and dressed in cotton pajamas with space rockets printed all over, and has a green facemask on.

"How are you alive?" The distraction works. "But I'm glad you're here because I think I ordered too many burgers."

Kenan massages his temples as we both make our way into Chris and Jordan's room. "The snow counteracts the alcohol, so it kicks me out faster." He looks around the room. "How come this is nicer than my room?" Chris and Jordan have the room directly below mine, so their front window overlooks the driveway. There are two double beds and a bathroom that opens out to the room. No privacy at all and appropriate for the time it was built.

I jump up onto the other double bed. "Keaton has a girl in his room."

Kenan is silent for a moment, even though both he and I know that I'm talking to him. "I know, baby girl. I saw them."

I thought that Keaton would have been the grumpy one storming down the stairs tonight to ask where I had been. I expected him to, not that I wanted him to.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I let out a soft laugh. "Where did this go wrong?"

"Probably around where you dragged me off the plane and got drunk?"

The door opens and Jordan carries in brown paper bags filled with food. Grease and meat fill the air and my mouth waters. He places a bag onto my bed. "You know, I don't think what's happening down there has anything to do with you."

I reach into the bag and take out a burger, sliding beneath the covers. "Well, it kind of feels like it does."



Ninety

Cartier

I haven't seen him at all since the plane, and I know that has to do with me staying upstairs all day to ignore him. I don't know what I'd do if I saw him, and who the hell is the girl who was in his room last night? I know it isn't Candi, so I'm guessing she's from Kiznitch.

My phone dings, and I roll onto my stomach to take it off the charger.

He's going to be here in thirty.

I blow out a deep breath and swing my legs over the bed. Choosing a leather short skirt, Doc Martens, black socks that come over my knees, and a simple tight white V-cut crop top, I throw everything on and brush my teeth, scrubbing my face with hot water and applying minimal makeup. My hair is getting way too long, and as much as I'd rather just leave it out to do its own thing because I'm too lazy, I pull out my makeup bag and grab some rubber bands before working it into a part and French braiding both sides. At least like this, they won't be in the way. Opening my phone, I hit play on Chase Atlantic and hum my way through the final braid. Once it's all done, I swipe my lips with blood-red lip stain and scoop up my black blazer before finally leaving my room. It's the first time I've been outside

of it since last night, and it has a lot to do with my brother and less to do with Keaton getting his dick wet the second he was back on home soil.

I make my way down my stairs, flying down as fast as I can. The chatter of people talking in the family room directs me, so I round the corner, my shoulders back and chin up. I've been around these men all of my life. I know how to handle them. *Or I pretend to.*

King stops talking, and I don't have time to assess who all is in the room because everyone turns to face me. I can't see them, but I can feel them staring at me. Bishop didn't come alone.

"Ahhh, Cartier Nero—" Nate Malum, a.k.a. the Devil with a Smirk, stands to his feet and makes his way over.

I roll my lips beneath my teeth before flashing him a sweet smile. "Nate Malum Riverside. Oh, how it's so *nice* to see you again after all this time," I joke, but my arms go around his neck and he picks me up from the floor, twirling me before placing me back down. Nate is probably my favorite out of all The Kings.

"Come. We're just about to start."

I follow behind Nate but make sure I take the seat directly between the two sides. The chair is dramatic and old, much like this castle, with old wood carved and crafted to mold around your body as the base curves high up your back.

I cross my legs, turning to greet Bishop. "Hello, Bishop."

"Cartier," he answers smoothly, his voice cracking at the end. He looks much better than the last time I saw him, not that Bishop Vincent Hayes can look bad. But last time, he was stressed. The kind of stress only love can look like.

King moves to the sofa beside Kohen and Keaton. Keaton, who I still haven't acknowledged. My eyes shift behind Keaton when a shadow catches my eye and I see her.

The girl from his phone when we landed. God. Why is it that I hated her as soon as I saw her face even though I didn't even know her? Now she's annoying me even more because I know she can see me staring at her, but she refuses to pay me any attention. As if I don't matter.

As if I don't deserve her attention.

My hackles shoot up and I don't realize I'm glaring until Keaton's voice cuts into my churning thoughts. "Cartier!"

“Rowr... play nice, kitty...” Killian teases, winking at me from across the room. Lilith chuckles from below Kyrin’s arm, and Kyrin shakes his head as if disappointed.

“Don’t recommend that nickname—just saying,” Bishop muses before leaning back in his chair with a cigarette between his fingers. “Alright. Let’s get to the bottom of this shit show.” His green eyes fall on me. “Tell me everything you know.”

I shuffle up the chair. “Back then, when I first met you all and Eli was *babysitting* me, we were followed in Eli’s car. Brantley was in there too, but it was just Eli, Brantley, Nial, and me”—I cut a glare toward my brother—“later that night, after Eli had told me that they were most likely for him, a man and his minions broke into my apartment.”

Keaton chuckles, leaning his head on the headrest of the sofa, and I want to tear his eyeballs out. I want to run my nails down the veins of his neck to remind him exactly who he is fucking with, because the man has clearly forgotten. Without thinking, my lip curls up and the need to cause pain to him overrides my logic. “But you see I wasn’t sure why they would be in my house.” He still hasn’t moved, that same smirk on his lips as he keeps his eyes locked on the ceiling. The girl steps closer to him, her hand resting on the side of his neck. Anger sears through me so hot it’s almost numb to the touch. “—since I only fucked Eli once, why would they want me?” Keaton snaps, before he can look directly at me. I turn my attention to Kyrin, who is shaking his head. Sorry, I mouth. He waves his hands as if to get to the fucking point.

King is the next to speak. “That was Dominic Stranger?”

I nod. “Yes. He and Bam Bam. I, of course, didn’t know who Bam Bam was until I started my training.”

“Bam Bam was part of your training?” Bishop asks, running his finger over his upper lip. It’s distracting because he’s hot.

“He was.”

“For shits and gigs, what part?” Kenan asks, jumping up and down like an excited toddler.

“What part do you think?” Bam Bam was nicknamed Bam Bam because of his expertise to be able to fuck. There was more to him than that, though, and I wasn’t sure whether I was ready to expose what Bam Bam had done.

Keaton shoots off the couch and makes his way to the fireplace.

“Damn. The Fathers actually set this up? They trained you in weird—” Nate’s hands fly around. “Weird shit?”

“Yep.” I relax into the chair. “I was with Bam Bam for a year, actually. So fast-forward when Eli leaves. I knew he was alive. Kaius told me that he wouldn’t be in the picture long. He had told me that in order to keep the balance, Eli had to leave.”

“Balance?” King kicks up his leg on the coffee table.

“That was all he implied. I figured out the rest.” I’m ignoring the movement happening near the fireplace. “So when I saw Eli finally at the bar a few months ago, there was a band that was playing. I had heard them before with Nial the day that we were followed. I felt...” I pause. I know what I should say, but it’s whether I want to because I know it’s going to sound real once it comes out of my mouth. “Weird when they played.”

“Hmmm, my kind of weird?” Kill asks from the sofa opposite. I like this room of The Castle. It sits like an atrium in the center of the building, with archways that lead off to different areas of the house.

“Yes. Kind of, but more drunk.” I shake my head. “Anyway, when I met with Eli at the bar, I saw the band playing again. Eli and I were mid-convo when I fainted.” I word quote with my fingers over the word *fainted*. “I woke up in another room, where Dominic and Bam Bam were. They warned me not to chase Eli again or there would be consequences. I came back, and that’s the last I heard.”

“So wait... Bam Bam trained you for an entire year, but he’s with Dominic?” Killian asks, confused.

“Yes. I don’t know why or how that all happened.”

“Are you still in contact with Eli?” Nate pipes in, changing the subject, which I’m thankful for.

“I am off and on. We text each other every now and then.”

Nate’s eyes shift to Kyrin. “And you?”

Kyrin nods.

“Okay, so here’s what we know...” Bishop pauses, and I watch as the wrinkle in the middle of his forehead crinkles. “Dominic Stranger is obviously Brantley’s uncle. His daughter was Bailey, who passed away recently. He has always been a piece of shit, so I’m not worried about him. At least, not to the extent that I should be. He is deranged, but he’s also well connected. We caught wind that he had been planning to take over Midnight Mayhem last month, but he was needing a sponsor.”

I wave my hand in front of me. “Ta-da—you all. He clearly needs The Elite Kings.”

Bishop shakes his head slowly, as if I should know better. “No. His sponsor was actually Kaius. He obviously tried with us, but money was all he could offer, and like you all, money isn’t something we need.” Something isn’t adding up. It feels like there’s a line missing in a timeline that none of us know.

“Well, this is all great. So when do we leave?” I clap, my skin itching to get out of this room. I feel like I’m suffocating being in the same area as Keaton right now.

“Here’s the other kicker—” Nate turns his pretty face around on us all. “They’re in Kiznitch.”

“What?” My phone vibrates against my ribs in my jacket pocket and I reach for it aimlessly. “Where?”

“They don’t know we are here, they know you’re here, but not us. We need to be smart. Keep them thinking they’re a step ahead.”

Looking down at my phone, I see an unknown number flash over the screen. I ignore it.

“So what time?” King asks.

“Tonight at twelve.”

“Perfect. Come. I’ll show you where you’re both sleeping.” King and Kill take Nate and Bishop with them, and I finally have a second with Kyrin.

“You fucked Eli?” Kyrin’s dark brow is arched to his hairline. I know when Kyrin is mad. And he’s not at this.

“I did. Look, it was weird. Well, no, it wasn’t weird. It was explosive when we first met and I found an instant connection with him. We had sex and then laughed and said let’s not do that again.”

Kyrin’s mouth curves downward and he nods. “Seems fair. Not going to lie.”

Lilith chuckles, leaning up and kissing Kyrin on the temple. “We get him back tonight. No distractions.” Kyrin seems to stiffen beneath her touch, and that’s the third time that I’ve noticed how uncomfortable they each become at different times.

“So Eli was smart, only hitting it once?” Keaton finally breaks the silence between us. My mouth opens to answer him back when my vibrating phone distracts me.

“Told you I’m not involved in this...” Ky and Lilith move out of the room, and then it’s just Keaton, Kenan, bitch with the dark hair, Jordan, and Christopher.

“It would seem so.” I smile up at Keaton from the other side of the room.

“Do you wanna ask me something, *Mina*?” My blood turns to ice at the use of a new nickname. I know why he’s doing it. To antagonize me.

My phone vibrates again in my hand, but I stand paralyzed by the way his eyes feel against my exposed skin. They shift down, past the slit exposing my stomach, to my legs, before traveling back up.

I swipe to unlock it. “Not anymore.” I walk toward the archway that I know leads me to the kitchen, bringing my phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“You’re going to listen to my next words very carefully, and you’re not going to sound any alarms, otherwise, you see that red dot over your right tit?” I stop moving, my eyes drifting down to my breast. “Yes, that’s the one. I will put matching ones on Kyrin, Keaton, and that precious little niece of yours.” I squeeze my phone in my hand.

“What do you want?”

“Go to the front door, get in a car, and await my next instructions.” I do as I’m told, my footsteps moving faster than I would have liked since I’m trying to sneak out of a fortress filled with men who have an eager eye.

Grabbing the keys to the McLaren, I close the front door quietly, in time for no one to hear.

“Very good. And you better hope for Jordan and Christopher’s sake that they don’t follow you.” I swallow past the lump in my throat, jogging toward the car and pushing the button to unlock it. I don’t wait for my phone to connect to Bluetooth. I floor it and the car shoots forward, down the driveway and out the parting wired gates.

“Okay, now what?” I yell toward my phone on the passenger seat.

“Keep driving to the docks.” I direct the car onto the on-ramp and drop it down into second. I haven’t been to the docks in years, but lucky for me, Kiznitch is fairly easy to remember. My hands move over the steering wheel, as if they’ve driven this path many times before. When the off-ramp comes into view, I hook a left, slowing my speed to the limit. Driving over the smaller bridge, the water comes into view and I slow down even further when I round the parking lot.

“I’m here! What am I looking for?”

“A very large white boat.” It annoys me that he says it so relaxed.

“There are a lot of very large white boats.” Pushing the button, I turn the car off and relax against the leather. Silence wraps around me in a way that makes my skin prickle with unease.

“Get out of the car and go down to the docks. You will see a white boat with red writing on it.” I slide out of the driver’s seat and lock the car, following instructions. It’s dark now, the sun finally setting over the mountains that enclose Kiznitch. The water is placid like liquid, yet somehow still majestically peaceful. I take the first step onto the jetty and search every boat I pass.

Nope.

Nope.

Not big enough.

No writing.

The red writing comes into view first, and my feet slow to a stop.

“Good, you found us. Now come on—” Dominic stands on the plank, a glass of whiskey in one hand and his other outstretched to me. “Don’t be shy.”

“What do you want?” I cross my arms in front of me, taking in what I can without being obvious. He’s wearing white slacks and a white suit jacket with a blood-red silk shirt beneath. His hair is slicked back to the nape of his neck, and I can smell the stench of his cologne from here. So loud and desperate.

“You don’t have a choice, Poppet. Get in the fucking boat.” He jumps down off the plank just as hands are around my waist, shoving me forward.

I shrug out of them and sneer at the man over my shoulder. “I know how to walk. Get your hands off me.” Following behind Dominic while maintaining a long enough distance, I shove my hands into my pockets, feeling for my phone.

“Sit, Ice Queen. Sit—” Dominic gestures to the seat opposite him at the front of the boat. There’s a spa and a bar that’s lit by strings of lights. “Before we go downstairs, I want to run some things by you.” He clicks his fingers, and a woman emerges from the shadows. She’s naked and bruised, with blood running down her temples.

“Okay. What is it?” So long as this boat doesn’t move, I can talk and remain calm. Vibrations shake beneath as the sound of engines roar to life. *Fuck.*

“First.” He points to the table. “Put your phone here.”

I place it in front of me, watching as the young girl lines cocaine out on the table. Her hands shake as she tips each line, and I bring my eyes to Dominic. “Where’s Eli?”

“Oh, that’s to come. First, I want you to pick up your phone and I want you to call—” He leans down, shoving a rolled bill up his nostril and sniffing the line. “Killian Cornelli!” He waves his hands out as if announcing some prized pet. I don’t want to ask why Killian, I don’t care. At least if I call Kill, they’ll know where I am.

I watch as the bridge up above us gets closer and closer, scrolling through my phone and tapping the green button on Killian’s name.

He answers instantly. “Where are you?”

“I’m—”

“—don’t be shy, sweetheart, turn the screen around so he can see me.” I set the phone down on the table, using the stand on the back of my case to rest it upward.

“With him,” I finish.

Killian’s eyes turn wild, the muscles on the sides of his jaw throbbing. “You said we would have more time.”

“Hmmm, you see, but then you went and got The Kings involved, and well...” I pale. Shit. He knows that we got them in.

“Where the fuck is Eli?” I yell, pushing up from my seat, only to be shoved back down from whoever it is behind me. Fingers bury in my hair as my head is yanked back so far cracks snap around my collarbone.

“Ahh, see, you’re going to want to just settle the fuck down, Cartier. Isn’t she, Killian?”

“Cartier, do what he says!” Kylin’s voice comes through the phone and I feel my emotions threatening to waver. I’m not a crier. I never cry. I’ve never seen the point of it honestly, aside from wasted energy, but right now, hearing my brother’s voice during a situation that I feel I have *severely* underestimated, it’s inevitable.

“Why?” I yelp when the hand in my hair tugs farther, ripping bits of my hair from their roots. I keep my eyes on my phone when the screen turns black, before Keaton’s face is filling it. His features are buried in a black hoodie, all that I can see are the sharp angles of his jaw. I squeeze my eyes closed because it’s too much to see him after the unnecessary pain we constantly put each other through.

“I’m going to suggest you take your fucking hands off her.” Keaton never has to raise his voice or be loud. People move when they’re supposed to and listen whenever he speaks.

The grip in my hair releases and I exhale loudly from the relief.

“Put Cornelli back on the phone, Keaton. You and I are done.” Dominic waves his hand in front of him.

“No. You said you’d give us more time. It was why you *had* him.”

The words settle in the back of my mind, and I reach for my phone. “What do you mean, had him?”

Dominic smacks my hands away, leaning against the table while tapping his forehead with his finger. “That was, until you went above my head and decided to gain an alliance with The Kings, now it’s playtime. Don’t worry. I’ll call back in two hours. See if you’re up for it then.” He taps the hang-up button and I launch to my feet again, ready to run and find Eli when something heavy hits me over the side of the head and I fall to the floor. Sprinkle of stars blur in the sky, warping together to form one big sun. Or moon. Maybe it was a moon... Something cold is around my ankles and my eyes won’t open fast enough. A hammer pounds against my head to a beat so hard it could cause an earthquake.

“Take her down.”

I’m lifted from the floor and then jolted as someone carries me down a set of stairs. Silence. Everything so silent. A loud crack splinters behind the back of my head, and when I try to push my body up from the floor, I fall back down.

“What did you do?” A voice. A familiar voice. “*I fucking told you I would handle it! Dominic! Dominic!*”

“Eli?” I whisper out, only my mouth fills with metallic blood and the marrow in my bones turns to stew.

“Yeah, baby, it’s me. Hey!” Warmth rests on my cheek. “Stay with me, Cartier. We’re going to get through this.”

“Through what?” I ask, my brows turning in. My eyes slowly blink open, and Eli’s face fills my vision. “We can just kill them all.” His face, bruised and bloodied, looks up behind me.

“If only it was that easy.”

Bringing my palms to the floorboards again, I push myself up, ignoring the constant pain exploding from my head. “What are you talking about?”

We can get out.” When he still doesn’t break his eye contact with me, I finally turn to see what he’s looking at.

There are two men, both naked with markings all over their bodies. Scratches, blood, mud, and—I don’t want to know what else.

“Who?”

“Just use me.” Eli moves, shuffling in front of me. “I am the deal, not her.”

“You’re part of it…” one speaks. I can’t get a reading on their age, but I would say mid-thirties. Both look military, or at least they are built that way.

The other one, who doesn’t speak, flashes my phone. “We’re going to play with you both for two hours and send some little clips to your boys. Then we will see if Killian wants to comply.”

“Comply with what?” I yell, skirting backward until my back hits the edge of the bed.

Eli’s head turns over his shoulder, and that’s when I notice all the marks on his back. Some old, some new. “I’m sorry, Cartier.”

“It’s not your fault.” It isn’t. It’s all my fault. I did this to him.

The one holding my phone launches at me and I squeeze my eyes closed, bracing for impact when he slams me back down onto the floor, everything turning black. Light cracks through every few seconds, my ass scraping against the concrete as I’m shoved forward, but it’s black. Like sandpaper between my legs, I cry out, only nothing comes out.

“That’s right. Look into the camera, Cartier. Show them who they’re fucking with.” I squint my eyes up to the flash, tears finally falling from the corner of my eyes. I don’t just feel him between my thighs, I feel him penetrating my soul too.

The phone shifts and the frame of a face comes into view. Familiar. A woman. *That* woman. I knew it.

“Keaton—” I burst into tears as a hand covers the lower half of my face. The flashlight is gone, so I close my eyes to brush it all out. In and out. Constantly. I don’t hear Eli anymore, and I reach sideways for him, touching a cold, hard finger. Dread fills my veins and I try to lean around to see if Eli is okay.

“Awww, you want a taste? Okay.” As soon as he extracts from me, I feel the heaviness of him lift from me physically but not mentally. I scatter across the room, grabbing the hand of who it was and pulling him near me.

I shove him away when I see it's the other guy, dead, his throat split open and blood still pulsing out of his vein.

"Eli!" I roar, looking up to see him tied to the cabinet that holds the engine. Gagged with handcuffs around one wrist and an eye closed completely. How he managed to slit the other guy's throat with one hand is beyond me.

"Well, come here then..." The man who is behind me picks me up from beneath my armpits and shoves me down on top of the corpse.

"No!" I yell, but a set of handcuffs is slapped around my wrists. The flash is back on in my face and I peer up at it until I see the shadow of the woman behind. "How could you? I kept your secret! I did *everything you fucking wanted!*"

The man behind me grabs me by the wrists and directs me over the dead guy's cock. My body shakes and food begins to rise up my throat. "Please. No. Not this."

"Oh, why not? I heard you and Keaton are pretty kinky with what you both like?" he whispers the words directly behind my ear, and I rear my head back as hard as I can until it collides with his nose. A crack splinters through my skull and rings through my ears.

Eli screams from behind his gag and I quickly stand to my feet, flicking my leg up and roundhouse kicking the woman holding the phone across the face until the phone slides over the concrete floor and toward Eli.

I step over the man who is holding his nose in his hand, the knife in his other. "Here's the thing. You're not going to kill me, because if you were, you would have done it already." I swipe him over the jaw with the edge of my boot. "And let's be real, I want you dead more." When he falls to the floor, I stomp on his hand to stop him from reaching the knife and turn over my shoulder to call out to Eli, but it's too late. The end of a pistol is flying straight into my face and everything goes black.

I don't know if I'm dreaming or if I'm dead. My head feels so swollen I can't process pain anymore. Everything is numb.

A chair moving across the floor screeches, and that's when I feel the chair beneath my ass. My hands are tied behind my back, and that same flashlight is beaming on my face. Slowly, I turn to see Eli in the same position as me, hands tied, and gag now falling out of his mouth. His skin is

pale and his face is barely recognizable. I widen my eyes, trying to gain clarity around the blood and goo as I focus on the vein in his neck.

I hold my breath and wait.

And wait.

Until a flutter of movement twitches beneath his skin.

“Guess who’s on the phone now?” Dominic murmurs from opposite me, the phone now facing me with the screen. “I guess they’ve decided to come play.” He leans forward, his arms on his thighs. Gray eyes stare back at me, and I picture what it’s going to feel like digging my fingernails into his pupils and tearing them right out. “For the record, Cartier, I didn’t want this.” His lips flatten, and his words are low, so low only I could probably hear them.

“Cartier.” Killian’s voice washes over me like a comforter. “Look at me, darling...”

I bring my head up, spitting the blood that’s spilling from my mouth onto the floor. Kill winces, swiping beneath his eye. “Fuck, *I’m sorry.*” He clears his throat. “Count down from ten, Cartier. I want you to picture red. The color, the taste, the sound. What does that mean to you?”

“What?” The word falls out of my mouth in a puddle of blood.

“Ten...” he says for me, and I watch as his blue eyes widen.

“Ten,” I repeat, imagining diving into his blue depths like I would the ocean. Swimming, drinking.

“Nine,” I say, and the ocean waters turns to blood. “Eight.” The metallic taste of blood touches the tip of my tongue, but when it slides down my throat, it crystallizes into sugar. “Seven.” My teeth sink into the flesh of a cherry as screams erupt around me. “Six...” My entire life rewinds backward, skipping over events from the past that I cherish, hold on to, or despise...

A woman was spread out on a hospital bed, her legs up in stirrups, and people around her body. They were screaming at her to push. Harder. Faster. Breathe. I continued to walk around the gathering until I could get between the cracks of two people.

“Push, Kiana.” My head turned to the side, following the sound of the doctor’s voice. I recognized him instantly as Kaius. What the fuck was Kaius doing in here with my mother?

I finally ghosted through the crack of bodies and goose bumps rose to the back of my neck.

“What’s happening?” I knew no one could hear me, but I needed to say the words anyway. I followed all of the other faces. Kaius, Keres, Kian, Kallisto.

“It’s a girl,” Kaius said, swiping the goo off the little baby’s face with the back of his thumb.

“Oh good!” My mother sighed out with a smile, looking up at her husband. The man I called Father all of my life and who I still looked at like one because he’s Kyrin’s.

“But she isn’t staying. She must leave us.” Kaius turned and screams erupted through the room when my mother launched off the bed, reaching for the baby. The baby, I’m guessing, was me.

My stepfather pressed her back down onto the bed with a forceful shove. “Let her go. She’s not of us.”

“She’s mine, which means she is!” My mother spat in my stepfather’s face. “If you don’t let me up, I’ll kill you.”

“I can’t.” He gazed up at Keres. “Do it. Remove her.”

Kallisto looked between the two of them.

“Fucking do it!”

Keres grabbed hold of my mother’s hand and squeezed, staring off into her eyes. As he whispered the words that were designed for her and her only, I walked around to the side of his back and noticed a Zippo lighter in his other hand. He’s working it with his thumb but going backward instead of forward.

What?

The baby. Me. Where had I gone? I dashed through the twin doors and ran down the corridor of the hospital, looking through each cubicle but finding them all empty.

I stopped, puffing when I reached the end, and that was when I heard it. The cries.

I paused. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I fell to the hard floor.

“She’s yours. No one here will know that she exists. And we’re even now. You don’t come for Keaton for killing your other girl. You do what you want with this one until the time comes.”

Cries whimpered from down the long corridor, and I stepped beneath the person who was awaiting to take me from Kaius. They're dressed in a long cloak that hid their face, but their body was small. I expected to see Dominic. I wanted to see Dominic.

I didn't see Dominic.

My head explodes with pain so hot it sears the backs of my eyes. "Cartier, look at me! Stay there. Close your eyes." Killian's voice puts me back into a lullaby...

Past

I tapped my pointed heel against the white marble floor. I was sure there was a clock ticking somewhere in the background, but that couldn't be right. There were no clocks in this house.

I stood from the chair and moved to the door, squeezing the handle and yanking it open. There was a guard at one end, and another at the other. Typical. God, but I was bored.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked, batting my lashes at Jim, the guard I knew I could get away with the most.

He slowly turned his body toward me, clutching the AR across his chest. "Downstairs in a meeting."

"Ohhh, sounds important..." I flew down the staircase, dodging his arms.

He pointed at me with the tip of his gun. "Get the fuck back upstairs."

"Nuh uh!" I wriggled my finger up at him while slowly walking down backward. "I'm bored, and I'm the only person who is home right now." As soon as my feet hit the bottom of the stairs, I flew around the corner and ran down the corridor, leaving a fit of laughter behind me.

"Hadley, no!" Jim yelled, just as I skidded through the double doors of the office.

The chatter stopped, and the four men who were seated on the opposite side of the desk with their backs turned to me slowly shifted to see who it was that had the audacity to fly through Dominic Stranger's office *during* a meeting.

"I'm bored!" I pouted my lips at my dad before looking around at the people who were in the room. They were all young. Like, young enough for

me to crush on, but one caught my eye like Mina Harker did Dracula. He had dark hair, olive skin, and eyes so deep they reminded me of a bottomless cave where bats lived. His cheeks were sharp and high, and his lips were perfect enough to kiss. But he had a lot of tattoos. Like, a lot of them, and I despised tattoos.

The air shifted, and the boys all looked around at each other, but I shook my head to clear the fog. I needed to stay focused. "Please, may I take the horse out?"

"The horse?" Dracula scoffed, kicking his leg out in front of him. "What the fuck."

"Yes!" I snapped, turning my face back to Daddy. He doesn't look too impressed. "Can I?"

I noticed the one beside Dracula didn't move and the grip he had on the arms of the chair was almost enough to cut off his blood circulation.

"Yes, go."

I retreated, moving back out of the room and slamming into Jim's hard chest. Turning around, I rested my palm against his pecs. "Well, what do you know... I wasn't in trouble." Jim wore a material patch sewn into his leather vest that read *Patience*. I had heard Daddy talk about them often, but not enough for me to really care.

I danced my way through the long corridor and out the front door. The spring weather was ripe in the air as sun rays burned my retinas.

I inhaled, and then exhaled, just as the familiar Porsche pulled up to the front of our old Victorian-style mansion. I didn't mind living in California, but I really wanted to visit New York one day.

Like soon.

I had an itch below my ear that needed to be scratched, and the longer I left it, the worse it got.

"Hey." The window split down, and Dove's face came into view. She wore Prada sunglasses covering her eyes and tapped her long fingernail on the steering wheel. "You free?"

"I need to go for a ride." I leaned on the windowsill. "And Daddy is home talking business with a bunch of hot guys with tattoos." She froze.

"What?" Her face drained of color, and I watched as her hand suffocated the leather around the steering wheel.

"Yup!" I popped the P. "There's four of them."

She slammed the car into first. “Okay, I’ll talk later!” Before I could check with her to see if we were still on for next weekend since it was my fourteenth and she *did* promise, she was gone.

Poof.

Out like someone was chasing her.

Carrying on to the stables, I stamped through the freshly grown grass and found Hermes, my pride and joy, and named after my favorite label. I found the mane brush near the pile of hay and bounced my way over to her.

“Hey, girl!” I started with light strokes, brushing down her near side and striking toward the back. “How about we go for a long run?”

I kicked my leg over her back and grabbed on to the harness, pulling her back and directing her out of the room. As soon as we were out of the wooden gate, I slapped my leg on her backside and she shot forward. The wind zapped through my hair like symphonies of music would possess a person to dance. My body tingled with adrenaline, so much of it I wanted to drink it all in one go.

We slowed when we hit the meadows, the bright gleam of sky-blue forget-me-not flowers glowing against the sun.

I smiled, swinging off Hermes and tying her to the stand, away from the shrub of color. Spinning around, I fell into the fluffy beds of floral, turning to brush my nose against the nearest one by my face.

“Little Bee, are you in here?”

I shot up from the dirt to see Papa knotting his horse to mine.

“Are they gone? Your visitors?”

He nodded slowly before falling down to the spot near me. Wrapping his arm around my shoulder, he pulled my head in toward him, inhaling my scent when his nostrils flared against my hair. “They are.”

“Are they important? I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

He silenced for a few beats before answering, “Not as important as my Little Bee.” His thumb that circled the side of my arm slowed, as the palm of his hand slid over my left breast, flicking over my nipple. I didn’t know much about the nipple area. Papa told me that it was for him. That all daughters were for their papas. He even showed me on TV what other girls did for theirs to show me that it’s okay. I cried the first time, though, because it was sore.

I smiled up at him, the sun blaring through my eyes and the color blue poisoning my peripheral. “Do you want me to play with you?”



It was my birthday. I was officially fourteen, and Papa or his schmucks didn't know this yet, but I was about to dance the night away and do alcohol. I wanted to drink alcohol like they did on *Gossip Girl* and I wanted to kiss a Chuck Bass. *Maybe*. In some of the videos Papa made me watch, the girls kissed multiple boys or men, but whenever I asked him if I would need to do that, he had not answered me.

"Here's the deal," Dove said from the driver's seat of her car. "We will stay until three a.m., because if Dom knows I've let you out, I'm in trouble."

"Dove..." I tapped her nose, but she swatted my hand away. "Nuh uh. The only reason I'm doing this is to save my ass because—" She stopped what she was about to say. "It doesn't matter." But it did, because she did that thing where she squeezed the steering wheel again. She clearly did matter—or it mattered to her? English was hard.

She pulled to the curb of a nightclub that she said we could party at. She said it was safe and secure and blah blah blah. I knew no one could touch me. Dominic Stranger was my papa, and anyone who was dangerous enough to hurt me knew who he was.

I shot out the door so fast Dove hadn't even put the car in park. Sliding past the security at the front, I slipped between the black opening doors. Music played so loud I almost thought my heart beat to the same tune.

A hand slipped into mine, gesturing me toward the bar near the side. "Come on. I need to be drunk for this."

"How old do you have to be to be in here? Everyone looks *so old*." And they didn't at all look like Chuck Bass. Was there fiction TV like there were fiction books? Was it a genre that could sprawl out across the board?

When I picked up the tiny glass filled with clear liquid, I didn't think to express those questions to Dove because she held it to my lips and told me to drink it fast.

And I did.

I put them away faster than I did water, and even after the third one, I could feel the room slightly tilt. The bar on my side felt more like it was

beneath my feet and the people dancing to the music began to warp together.

A catchy song came on and I pulled Dove with me, twisting her arm up in the air to move her through. The alcohol warmed my blood like adrenaline did riding Hermes, and before I could stop myself, I was grinning from ear-to-ear, flinging around the room until I crashed against a hard chest. As I was dancing, my hands found their way to the back of his neck and I tilted my head to get eyes on him. His face was a blur, but I could make out tattoos, maybe a jaw? Laughing, I thought of the boys I saw in Papa's office last week. Leaning up on my tippy toes, I was meaning to whisper and ask him if it was him as a joke, when my lips crashed on his.

Oh...

That same warmth that alcohol was giving me had nothing on this. This was hot lava that exploded over a small village and turned them all to molten skin and bones.

This was the kind of kiss I *wanted*. Until arms came to my elbow and he shoved me away. Bringing his lips to the back of my hair while spinning me around so fast my bum hit his knees. His knees because he was *so tall*.

"Follow me, princess." I allowed my feet to carry me to wherever he was going, because again, no one was going to touch me here. Not anywhere. We reached an emergency exit, and I turned to face him finally as his hand rested on the bar to open it behind me.

My eyes flew to the dance floor where I saw the back of Dove as she shoved through people to get out. Not to come and save me. To run away.

He pushed me backward just as the door flew open and someone caught me from below. Before I could say anything, everything went black.

I woke in a room. Small with bars caging me in, but with a single bed tucked in the corner and cold, but clean, floors. My head thrummed and my eyes stung like I had dropped acid right into my retinas, but I managed to roll to the side and push myself up from the carpet. It was cold. So cold my teeth were about to crack from crashing together every time the air frosted over the crux of my spine.

Sliding toward the cell door, my fingers squeezed around the poles as I forced myself up to my feet. "Hello!" My voice echoed through the empty walls. I shook the bars as if they'd pop open and let me out. "Let me out!" I screamed so long it burned the back of my throat.

“There’s no point,” a voice came from the cell opposite me and my head whipped forward. Shadows danced over the back wall, but just out of them I could see the outline of leather boots. “They prefer it when you scream.”

“Well, they don’t know who I am...” I said matter-of-factly.

“Darling, I’m pretty sure whoever you are, they’re worse.”

“Maybe...” I folded my arms in front of me. “But not scarier than my papa.”

“Your papa?” The voice was low but held a softness about it too. “No one here gives a fuck who your papa is, that I can promise you.”

“Stop making promises, Kenan,” another voice interrupted from the other side of the corridor just as a heavy door slammed closed and boots thudded closer. “You’re in no position—literally—” There were two of them. One was taller than the other, and leaner, but the other was still very good looking. Recognition slapped me across the face like the wind did when I was riding, and I stepped back, releasing the metal of the cell like it burned. “Awww... do you think she recognizes us now?”

“She does,” I answered, far too quickly for someone who had fear prickling over the back of my neck. Because these boys knew who Papa was. *They knew*. And they didn’t care. “What do you want?” I shoved my chin up stubbornly, folding my arms across my chest.

It was the third day of being held in this hellish hole they called a *room*. I was fed, even though it was weird takeout burgers and drinks that had fizz to them, and had clothes handed to me, but I wasn’t home. Where I wanted to be.

“You know they always get what they want,” Kenan said with a chuckle. “You can put up a fight as much as you want, but they always get what they want.”

“Are you giving in?” I whimpered, waiting for him to stop pacing back and forth in his cell. He did that often. He told me he was stuck in a mental warfare, where he didn’t know if he wanted it or if he needed it. I said the only thing that separated the two was desperation.

Finally, he fell to the bed, burying his hands in his thick mane of hair. “I am. But I need to know you will too.”

“Why?” I asked, squeezing my arms around my knees. “Why does it matter?”

“Because they’ll kill you.”



Twenty

Keaton

Past

“We’re not killing her.” Kyrin pointed around the room with the finger that held the cigarette. “She’s my fucking sister. We have to save her.”

“Save her?” Killian snorted, and I watched carefully between the two of them. “That bitch is laced up to Daddy Dom like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“She’s been groomed...” I said the words the rest of them seemed to dance around. Kyrin flinched. I felt for him. Who knew Kyrin did have a heart, it just belonged to his long-lost psycho little sister sitting in cell four. Who also fucking kissed me. “Clearly.”

“She won’t break.” Kyrin shoved his hands into his hair. “We need another way to make her leave with us.”

“Hold up!” Kill flipped a chair around and lowered onto the plastic. “Did Delila tell you why? Why we needed her right now and what the fuck Dom was doing with her?”

King shook his head, glaring up at the ceiling. The room we were in was what separated the cells and the stairs that led to the main level of The Castle here at The Village. “No. She said it’s between Kaius and Dom.”

My teeth clenched together so hard they almost cracked. “That motherfucker.”

King picked up a chair and slammed it onto the ground. “I don’t want to believe it, but I always knew he was rotten.”

“—says the people who have a fourteen-year-old girl locked in the basement.”

I leaned forward. “You say that like it’s a new thing?” My brows hit my hairline when Killian shook his head. “I know what we need to do, but I want two things to happen.”

All of their eyes shifted to me.

I raised a finger. “One, get Delila on the phone.” I find Kill. “Hope your mind tricks are ready, because we’re about to make her believe she’s been with us all along.”

Killian shifted forward, his devious eyes gleaming on mine. “Fuck, I love how fucked up you are.” He clapped his hands. “Let’s do this.”



Twenty-One

Present

Cartier

I stare blankly at the phone as the floor beneath me rocks side to side against the waves of the water.

Back on the boat.

The same, only not.

“Cart—” Dominic switches the phone off, cutting Killian’s yelling and hands the phone to Dove.

Memories swirl inside my brain like a whirlpool of colors. I know everything. From the second Killian came into my cell and changed my memories.

“Are you back, Little Bee?” His foot taps against the floor at the same time Dove shuffles between us both. My mouth dries and the taste of metallic is far stronger than it was earlier.

I feel Eli twitch behind me and I freeze. I can’t have them know that he’s coming to. Knowing Dominic, and now I do know him. Very well. He will do anything and everything to keep me locked in his cruxes. *Everything was a lie*. My mind cripples my will to swallow. To go on.

“Barely,” I whisper. “Let me out of these ties.”

Dominic and Dove share a look before Dom nods, waving his hand forward. When Dove leans down to untie my ties, I flick the knife that's in my hand through my fingertips and sink it into her thigh.

She screams, falling to the ground in a puddle.

"Little Bee, that's not nice." Dominic studies Dove in pain like he would a fly on his shoulder. Before I can take another step, a shadow emerges from behind him, and Bam Bam smirks up at me, an AK pointed right at my chest.

"Bam Bam..." Digging my nails into Dom's shoulder, I twist him around until his back is to my chest and press the knife to his throat. "My friend, tell me, are you going to explain to The Kings when they see Eli?" Bam Bam's dark eyes widen in shock, before he lowers the gun to his side.

"Ahhh, she figured it out." He dances forward, a smile wide. *"Riddle me this... when you're older and everything comes to light, you're going to realize that my crown doesn't shine so bright."*

I sink the blade farther into Dom's throat just as Bam Bam's arm carrying the AK snaps up to aim at Dove. "Don't fucking move, sweetheart. I don't really want to explain to Kohen that I killed his favorite little puppet." I don't mind telling him. "You know who I am, baby girl. Don't do this."

"I know everything, Bam Bam."

"Little Bee, how disappointing that even after all you've just learned, you still can't see past your loyalty to a bunch of men who don't give a fuck about you," Dominic says through a tight throat.

"Wrong," I whisper against his neck. His smell hits me like a fist down my throat. All of the lies. The capture of my own sanity.

"Tsk ts." Bam Bam shakes the weapon. "No, no. I have to take him with me, Poppet."

I bare my teeth up at Bam Bam. "Like fucking hell you are!" With the onslaught of memories still fresh on my brain, Bam Bam would need to shoot—a gun fires off and my arm erupts with pain.

"Shoot you?" My hand comes to the wound, and I cry out as I fall to the ground beside Dove. "You want me to kill her? I can..." He points to Dove with the tip of his gun. I know he wouldn't kill me. I know beneath all of the trauma, he wouldn't hurt me, but my anger is overflowing. I had Dominic right there beneath my grip!

"Fuck you!"

Stepping forward, he picks Dominic up from below his arms and drags him upstairs.

“Oh! And I think your ride is almost here!” I don’t get to answer him because he’s gone. Dove moves quickly, reaching for the knife, but I kick it away from her hand and grab the plastic end. People who I thought were friends are really enemies. There’s no family. No unit. No *nothing*. Nothing but lies and fake realities.

“You!” I hold the tip beneath her chin, forcing her head upward. “Fucking traitor.”

The corners of her mouth curl in a grin, her teeth flashing bright red from blood. “And you’re not?”

“No,” I whisper, twisting the blade just enough to see blood trickle down. “I’m not, but you? You’re unredeemable.” I should kill her. I want to kill her. After everything I know she has played a part with, I know it’s the least she deserves, but I don’t want her blood on my hands. When you take a life, it stains you and the only ones who see the stains are those who have taken lives themselves.

A loud thud bangs upstairs, but I still haven’t dragged my eyes away from her.

“What is it, Cartier?” Dove raises a brow. “You want to be the one to tell them?”

I snatch my hand away from her just as loud footsteps tumble downstairs.

“Fuck...” Kyrin is the first that barrels straight for me, wrapping his arm behind my back. More people sift in behind him and I see the exact moment his eyes lock to Eli in the corner. His face changes from worry to relief. I never thought I’d see my brother in love, let alone in love with two people at the same time.

“Oh my God!” Lilith barrels through Bishop who is already helping Eli up from the ground.

She climbs on top of his lap, her hands on his cheeks. “I don’t know if I’m going to fuck or kill you right now.” Everyone silences, a deep chuckle escaping my lips.

“You can be my dirty little bitch soon. Just get me the fuck out of here.”

Kyrin leaves a soft kiss on my head before going to help The Kings and Lilith with Eli.

I wince when Keaton wraps an arm around me. I can't swallow all of what has happened. I don't have the mental capacity to unpack it all in this moment, so I allow him to carry my weight.

I will never forget.

I say nothing the whole way back. Not when Keaton carries me out of the boat and onto theirs. Not when I watch Kill help Dove onto the boat too. Not when we drive back to The Main Castle, and not when I'm back in my room.

I don't speak. To anyone.

Betrayal creeps up my spine and cripples my throat as I fall to the floor in the bathroom. Everything I knew was a lie. The memories with The Brothers—a *lie*. I didn't meet them until I was fourteen years old in that club. Tears roll down my cheeks viciously. No amount of training with The Fathers, Bam Bam, or Delila could have prepared me for this. There's no shield to protect your memories and mind around people like them. I need answers, but for right now, I push myself back up from the ground and turn on the shower.

I can't trust anyone.

I thought this was my family. I thought I knew these people—I didn't.

Stepping beneath the water, I release a deep breath when it rolls over my body and through my scalp.

Everything after that age was real.

Everything before—a *lie*. The memories that weren't real begin to dissolve into the back of my mind the longer that time goes on. As if they know they're not needed anymore and are leaving me. Their job here is done, the manipulation—done.

The times I was with Keaton and we would play around. The times of me riding. *Every conversation*. Every memory. Embrace. All a fucking lie!

I don't stop the tears when they continue to drown me. My sobs turn into violent hiccups as I shove the shower tap down, cutting the water. Stepping out, I swipe the condensation from the mirror with my hand and wince when I see my reflection. The skin around my eyes is puffy and dark, my face drained of any color. I touch the ends of my hair with my fingers, and all the color does is remind me of the flowers that grew from the meadow at the farm. *He pushed inside of me so roughly I yelped as my small fingernails dug into his thighs.*

Kicking the toilet seat up, I lurch over the bowl and spill whatever was left in my guts out. My stomach burns as the final heave comes up dry and I hit the flush button, swiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Gargling some mouthwash and washing my hands, I hurry into the bedroom and find my phone on my bed. Scrolling through my contacts, I find *Hairdresser Kiznitch* and hit the phone button.

“Hello?”

“Hi, I need your help. Now.”

She doesn’t miss a beat. “I’ll be there soon. Anything I should bring?”

“Bleach. I need to get this color out of my hair.”

The line goes quiet for a brief second. “You sure?”

“Yes.” I tap on the end call button and tear through my clothes to find something to wear. Something powerful. Something that’s going to make me look better than I feel.

I hold up a pair of sweatpants, squeezing them tightly in my hand. All I want to wear is this. This right here. I know I have business with The Brothers, business that I need answers to before making any further decisions, but now I’m nervous.

Why was King so quick to kill his father? I mean, sure, he did a lot wrong, but did killing him also benefit them in a way?

I don’t trust anyone.

There’s a knock on my bedroom door.

“It’s unlocked!”

Jordan pops his head in. “There’s an Amie here to see you?”

“Let her in.” I wave my hand and lower myself onto the edge of the bed when she enters, pushing a metal cart with the latest Louis Vuitton bag on top.

“Hey, Cartier!” Amie is a five-foot-something goddess who is a magician with hair. She pauses when she sees me, placing a hand on her hip. “I know better than to ask, but honey...” She slowly makes her way to the bed, kneeling in front of me. Her hand rests on mine. “I know this may not be my place, but are you sure this is what you want?” No, I’m not. My blue hair is the one thing that makes me feel like me. I know it sounds superficial, but to me, it never was. I can’t imagine myself without it.

I reach up and touch the ends as pain rips through my chest. “No, I don’t know.” Did my subconscious know to color my hair to take away the pain of staying the brunette I once was?

Finally having the knowledge of something I've wanted to know for so long isn't reassuring. It isn't calming. Now I'm angry. Anger is to pain what oxygen is to fire. *Fucking catastrophic.*

Shaking my head, I bring my eyes to hers. "No."

"Okay, hon." She pats my hand and stands back to her feet. "How about we do something else?"

I swipe the tears off my cheeks and nod. "Yeah. Okay." I watch as she busies herself with the bottles on her trolley. Amie always does my hair when I'm back in Kiznitch, even if she's fully booked out, which she always is. I've come to know her over the years, especially since taking on my role as CEO and spending more time in Kiznitch. Ideally, I want her to come on the road with us. I trust her.

"Amie..." I reach for her arm when she jumps, turning back to face me. I see the worry etched in her eyes and the subtle hint of something being wrong. "What is it?"

"There's something I need to tell you, and... well, show you."

I stare at the white wall in front of me. There are swirls from the plaster curved and cut into patterns, and right up the top of the fireplace is a little cherub face that's plastered into the wall.

A fucking cherub.

Everyone is here, but I refuse to look at any of them. I *refuse*.

"Cartier, talk to us." Kyrin's voice is strained, as if he had rehearsed those same simple words over and over again. Why did he even think to ask me that?

"Killian..." I finally shift my focus to where he sits on the two-seat sofa opposite the burning fireplace.

Killian's brows raise up in question, but without a second thought, he stands and closes the distance between us. Lowering himself down onto the coffee table, he rests his hands on his knees and sighs. "Alright, baby girl. Let's do this."

I bring my hands to his and shut my eyes. I roll over the conversations I don't want to hear or know, stopping at one they had last night. It's no point going farther back from then because the older a memory is, the harder it is to manipulate. I know the fresh ones are real.

Keaton slammed his fist into the wall, his back rising and falling as he took in deep breaths. This was when I had been taken, they must have just

found out about me. I hung back behind Killian and watched their altercation.

"He won't kill her," King announced, typing on a laptop. He's tucked into the desk of the main office downstairs. "She means too much to him."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Killian asked, and I tried to slap his packet of smokes out of his hand when he pulled them out.

"It means that he needs her alive as much as we need him alive but not as much as Bam Bam wants him alive."

"Why the fuck do The Kings want with Dominic? I thought they washed their hands of his bullshit."

"They have, but they want him. The reason why Eli was here? Was to find who was working against The Kings. Eli found that with Dominic, all while protecting Cartier and him taking her back. He did a direct swap—him for her. It worked well, until Dominic decided he did in fact need Cartier."

"Why?" Keaton yelled, spinning around to face Killian. Seeing his face was like a punch in the stomach. His hair was disarrayed, deep lines below his eyes, and sweat sparkled over his temples. The vein that pulsed beneath his skin throbbed and his jaw tightened so hard the muscles on the outside twerked.

"We don't know. Eli doesn't know either. He's been trying to figure it all out."

The whole crowd sighed, and I felt it. The truth in their words.

I pull my hand back from his and lean back in my chair. "So no one knows why Dominic wanted me in the first place or why he wanted me back, Eli cut a deal to take my place while trying to see what kind of threat he is to The Kings, and King has killed the only person who could have ever told us?" I glare right up at King. "Did I miss anything?"

Keaton steps closer to my chair and my eyes finally snap up to his. "Who was the girl that you had with you?"

Keaton's face changes into something I don't recognize, before he lowers down beside me, his hand coming straight to my chin, forcing my eyes to his. "She's a no one."

"So charming," I snide, ripping my face out of his grip. The lies are starting to taste a lot like he's never fucking touching me again, but does he know? Or doesn't he?

He chuckles so low it vibrates through every single inch of my traitorous body. *Fuck*. But I remain frozen. Dead. *Cold*. “I want him dead. And I want it done tonight.”

“Okay,” Kyrin says, agreeing.

“Yeah, done.”

This time when my eyes meet Keaton’s, they’re softer around the edges. “Bleed all of the answers out of him.”

Keaton’s thumb grazes the edge of my lip and I ignore the quiver that snakes down my spine, shoving away from him. “Done, baby.”

I’ll touch on the pet names later.

Pushing up from the sofa, I look directly at King. “I want the second crew to stay on. Regardless of whatever Kaius was cooking up, I can’t be around any of you right now, and I’d rather be with them than be here with any of you.”

“—Cartier—” I throw my hand up, stopping Kyrin’s next words.

“—I don’t want to fucking hear it.” Kyrin steps backward, but Keaton stays close.

“You can’t just go in the middle of something we don’t know or understand, Cartier. This is bigger than what has happened here, and we need to keep this in-house.”

“Kyrin.” I bring my eyes to his. “I love you, but right now, I don’t trust you.” I look up to Keaton. “Any of you.”

Keaton remains passive. “You do whatever you got to do, but know that if and when I think you should be home, I’m dragging you back here whether you’re protesting or not.” He leans down until we’re at eye level, his nose barely touching mine. “And I think you and I both seem to remember how good I am at that, right?”

I don’t satisfy him with an answer when I turn to leave. The way I see it—this is their problem. I’m not like the others. I don’t make excuses for their behavior, nor do I take blame for their own stupid decisions, because unlike them, I’m better at keeping secrets.



Twenty-Two

Keaton

She took it better than I expected. Too good.

I watch her from beneath the tree that hovers over the pool in the backyard. She's talking on the phone and walking back and forth in front of her window. I go between sipping my whiskey and sucking down the smoke from Kill's rolled joint, but my eyes never leave her. She's different. I thought she would have exploded from finding out that we had fucked with her memories as a kid and that she hadn't known who we were like she thought. I thought she would have thrown a fucking fit. Maybe popped my other eye. Even as her reaction settles deep inside my gut, I know that something is wrong. Her reaction wasn't real. It was almost a lie. I don't need to know Cartier all of my life to know who she is. You can't put time on a bond that burns endlessly.

She stops pacing and my fingers pause, just short of my lips. I push off the trunk of the tree slightly and watch as she slowly turns her head over her shoulder. She can't see me from down here, but I sure as fuck know that she can feel me.

Flicking the joint to the ground, I step into it and make my way through the back doors and into the lounge room where King, Kill, Kyrin, and

Kenan are. Eli is tucked in the corner, drinking whiskey straight from the bottle while resting an ice pack against his swollen eye with Lilith behind him.

“Something is wrong...” I slam the door closed behind me. “That wasn’t what I expected.”

“We don’t have time to figure out her reaction. We need retaliation and answers as to why Bam Bam has taken the one man I want to crush with my bare hands.” Kyrin’s voice is low and unfazed, but his eyes are wild and on mine. Ky has been my best friend all of my life. This is him on the edge of a mental breakdown, because not only did they mess with his little sister, but they fucked with Eli.

“You’re all fucked out of each other now with your reunion?” I tease, and Kyrin flips me off.

“You motherfuckers didn’t have to listen.”

“Um, was kind of hard not to...” Killian adds, winking at me.

“Anyway, that’s what I’m talking about.” I lower myself onto the sofa, kicking my leg out to steady myself from the whirl spinning inside my mind. I fucking hate alcohol, but after the past twelve hours, I need it. I need it to stop me from tearing through Cartier’s room and demanding why the fuck I feel as though she’s keeping something from me.

“Dominic is part of our world, Kill,” Eli murmurs softly from the corner. “I was there because of King business, and did the direct swap. I thought it was enough, I thought I was enough, but I wasn’t. He fucking wants Cartier, and I don’t know why.” Eli tosses the ice pack onto the floor, staring up at the ceiling blankly. “I fucking tried to find out anything about what he wanted from her and got nothing. Zilch.”

“It doesn’t add up,” King adds from his spot in front of the fireplace. “Bam Bam taking him, shooting her, and running. Why wouldn’t Bam Bam kill her?”

“He didn’t shoot her. He grazed her,” Eli says carefully. “He knew exactly where to shoot.”

“And was he alone?” Kenan asks, leaning his elbows on his thighs as he shifts forward on the couch.

“No, Dove was there. She’s been with him all along.”

I pause, the grip around my glass tensing. “What do you mean *all along*?”

“Dove and Dominic have had something—”

“—she’s a prisoner there, Keaton. Dove has never wanted to be under Dominic.” Lilith’s voice echoes out and my eyes land on King. I can’t have this conversation with Eli or Kyrin. They’re both blinded by their love for Lilith that they won’t see what I’m feeling.

What I’m pretty sure King is feeling.

King sighs, massaging his temples. “Fuck. What a headfuck.” Before he’s said anything else, Nate and Bishop walk through the entrance, stopping when they see us all deep in conversation.

“I take it we haven’t figured anything else out?” Nate asks, looking around the room.

“No.” I shoot back the rest of my drink and slam the glass onto the coffee table. “But I’m about to.” Standing from the sofa, I move around Nate and Bishop and take the stairs up to the master level. On any other day, Kyrin probably would have fought me on what I’m about to do, but he and I both know that road is over. There were two reasons why he wanted me to stay away from Cartier.

One was because of my extracurricular activities, but the other? Was because of her not knowing who I really was.

She does now, and either way, how I play this game going forward is up to me.

The patterns carved into the twin doors that open into her suite have been sliced with blades from our ancestors, the intricate curves of the Kiznitch star and the four families.

“She’s grumpy,” Jordan says from one side.

“More than usual,” Chris adds from the other.

“Yeah?” I say to both of them. “Good. She fucks better when she’s mad.” Shoving through the doors, she stops walking and her hands fall to the sides, where she quickly ends the call with whomever it is she’s talking. Her room is perfection. The four-post bed, the old open fireplace burning opposite, and the net curtains covering the open bay windows near the patio.

“Keaton, you can’t just walk in!” I watch as the grip around her phone intensifies.

I take another step. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head, stepping backward. Her long hair is more of a washed-out teal now instead of a hard blue, and somehow, it works for her even more.

Her cheeks flush, and I'm reminded of her age. Caught up in the drama, the labels that we all hold, I forget how young she truly is. Too young to be standing toe-to-toe with a notorious killer.

"I know when you're lying," I say the words slowly to be sure that she catches them. She does, in a grip so fucking tight it almost replicates the way she feels around my cock.

Her shoulders widen back and her chin juts upward. It looks hella cute on her, since I think she's about as scary as a blunt knife held to my throat in the middle of broad daylight. "Do you, though?" Her eyes narrow as I take the final step into her space and her back slams against the concrete wall. Her throat constricts when she swallows, but it's not in fear. As scary as I may be to most people—all people who are smart enough—I'm not to her. It has both enraged and turned me on over the years. Her next words are a soft whisper. "You're the liar, Keaton."

"I never lied to you, Cartier..." I test her patience, bringing my finger to the side of her face and tracing the curve of her high set cheekbones.

She winces and my eyes fly to hers, my finger pausing as if I've physically hurt her. And maybe I have. I never really thought about it until now. I know she loves me, but does she still now that everything has gone? After what she has learned, and what she's most likely about to learn when it comes to Dominic Stranger and whatever secrets he's holding on to?

She turns her face away from my touch and I'm the one wincing. "I can't do this with you."

"No questions, though?" I ask, rage slowly building inside of me. I expected more of a fight from her. Anything more than what she's giving me, yet I saw more of a fight from her when it came to getting Eli back. "No, *'why did you do it, Keaton?'*" I run my eyes over her face like I'm never going to see it again. "What about *'why did you come and visit me after you killed people?'*"

She snaps, her head turning to face me and her finger stabbing my chest. "No. Because it doesn't fucking matter now, does it, Keaton?"

"And why not, Cartier?" If she won't spit fire at me and turn me to ash with her words, I'll force her to her knees and feed her gasoline. "Tell me fucking why!"

"Agh, you are so fucking *frustrating*, Keaton! You use a girl to work me up after everything that we've ever been through—"

"—everything *false* that we've been through..."

Her mouth snaps closed, and for a second, I almost think I've slapped her hard enough for her to rip into me, but her eyes widen and her lashes fan out over her cheeks as she blinks past whatever she was about to say.

"Yeah." She turns her back to me, moving across the room to the bar cart and removing the glass plug from a bottle. "Yeah, you're right, Keaton." She turns back around to face me, a glass now pressed against her lips. "Are you done?" She takes a small sip, and I watch as her eyes close briefly. Her nostrils flare, and the grip she has around the glass tightens.

My lip curls up in a smirk because I know she sure as fuck isn't.

"Not everything was false, Keaton." Her eyes are wild and on mine.

"Wasn't it?" I taunt, unable to hide my snide smile. Her arm rears back and the glass that was in her hand goes flying across the room.

I duck just in time, laughing. "Need to work on your aim, baby. Maybe after we've figured out which feelings you had for me were real and weren't."

"Fuck you, Keaton!" she screams, pointing her finger at me. *I've got her.* "You and I both know what wasn't because I know everything now!"

"Hmmm." I take a step forward, and before she can back away from me again, I catch her hand with mine and force her into my chest. My arm is tight around her back, holding her in place. "Kiss me."

"Fuck you!" she hisses, sneering up at me.

I run the tip of my nose down the middle of her forehead before resting mine on hers. "You can. After you kiss me."

The tightness in her body lessens slightly. "You lied to me."

With my other hand, I curl my finger beneath her chin to force her face up to mine. Pressing my lips over hers, I whisper, "Not about us."

"I'm not kissing you." Her lips move over mine as she speaks.

I run my tongue over the edge of her bottom lip. "Then I'm taking what's mine." I kiss her and her body melts into mine, but she doesn't respond. When I bring my hand up to her cheeks, squeezing to spread her lips, she finally parts slightly and I slip my tongue into her mouth.

There's a bang on the door. "What!" I growl.

"We're heading out, bruh. Hurry the fuck up!" Killian's annoying voice kills my night once again, and I tear myself away from her lips with a hand around her throat. "You're to stay the fuck here while we sort this out."

Her head is shaking before I finish the sentence. "No, I'm coming."

“No, the fuck you ain’t. You are staying your ass here, and I fucking mean it, Cartier.” Backing up while keeping my focus on her, my hand comes to the door handle and I swing the door open to my brothers. I grab Jordan’s sleeve. “She is not to leave this house, do you understand?”

“I don’t take orders from you.”

The sarcastic laugh leaves my throat, but my hand flies to his and I’m lifting him in the air with one hand. I wait until he’s eye level with me before I say my next words. “You may not work for her, but *she is mine*, and if a single hair on her head is touched by you or anyone else, I’m not going to kill you, Jordan. I’ll get Killian here to find out your darkest and deepest fears and bring them all to life before killing you. Do you understand?”

He doesn’t, but he nods anyway. I drop him back to the floor and Cartier is at the door, glaring at me. “Are you fucking done?”

I wipe my hands on Killian, turning my back to her. “I mean it, Cartier. There’ll be a bloodbath if I get back and you’re not here.” Once I hit the stairwell, my eyes laser into hers. “And you know I can...”

Jogging down the stairs, we all head out of The Castle to a waiting SUV. There’s three in a line and Bishop and Nate wind the window down at the front.

Bishop whistles. “He’s about a two-hour flight away. Didn’t get far for whatever reason.” I don’t ask any more questions. I want to get the fuck on this plane and get some fucking answers.

The flight is quick. With a cargo full of ammunition, I’m thankful that we don’t need to fly back overseas to do this because I’m not so sure we have enough pull to bypass international security. Just the ones in Romania. We’re jumping into waiting SUVs with the security loading up the last of the cargo into the trunk spaces when my phone goes off in my pocket. We split into four SUVs, with Kenan, Lilith, and Ky rolling with The Kings.

“What?” I don’t bother to see who is calling me.

“We have a problem.” I don’t want to hear those words coming out of Jordan’s mouth because I know it has something to do with Cartier. “She’s gone. She left a note.”

“A what?” I bark down the phone and everyone in the car jumps. “What the fuck do you mean, she left a note?” That little fucking bitch. She waited until I was on the plane before she did something stupid.

I wave my arm in the air to force King to drive forward. I have no doubt in my mind we're about to see her in less than ten minutes, and I have no doubt in my mind that my hands are going to find themselves around her throat. Not for pleasure this time. I'm straight up going to die today because I'm going to fucking kill her.

"She just said, '*You're not the only liar in this game.*'" He pauses. "The next part she asks to make sure you're all in the room on speaker before I say it."

"What?" I snap, my patience hanging painfully close to the fucking edge because this motherfucker wants to die.

"I need to say the next part when everyone is present. Are all The Brothers and Kenan there?" Panic rips through my muscles, and I have the urge to turn the car around and get back on that plane. An emptiness stretches out the farther away we move from the airplane when I realize something is wrong.

"Stop the car!" I yell before tapping King. "Get Kyrin on the line and put him on speaker."

King doesn't hesitate when the car is pulled to the side of the road and the dial tone is loud around the car.

"Put me on speaker too," Jordan says, and I hit the button just as Kyrin picks up.

"What are you idiots doing? We have to get to Dominic."

"Something is wrong. Cartier has done a runner again and has left a note. Jordan has said that we all need to hear her next words after confessing that she's a fucking liar."

Kyrin stays silent. "Speak."

Jordan blows out a deep breath. "Before I say these next words, I need you to know, Keaton, that I know about Kissime. I know that you saved her and hid her in Kiznitch. I know that she's Delila's other daughter, and for whatever reason I'm sure you have, you hid her to protect her. Amie told me everything. She then passed on this note to me and told me to read it out loud once you're all together. After I say these words, the blanket you've been put under will evaporate and you'll be left with nothing but the truth. The real truth this time." Jordan pauses. I don't have time to think about her finding out about Kissime, because he chants... "*In our messed-up way, the cherry will always symbolize our bond. We grew as a pair from the earth and shared the same flesh and blood. When one is disconnected from the*

other, we rot and die. I rot... and die." The words crumble to the floor and colorful pictures flood into my mind like a time warp being sucked into another dimension. Colors spin around me so fast I can't breathe. After a second, I inhale deeply at the same time as everyone else in the car and rage burns to the top of all the other emotions I'm feeling.

"She didn't..." King says, almost to himself. The first to break the silence. "Why the fuck would Kissime do this? Did Cartier know?"

"I don't think Cartier knew until Kissime told her, too," Killian mutters, the only one bold enough to speak.

Kyrin gasps through the phone, and I almost think he's crying when I turn to face Killian, who is staring at me from the passenger seat. They're all looking at me. Waiting. Almost begging for me to say something.

Anything.

But all I feel is rage.

"What just happened?" Kenan whispers out loud.

My teeth clench together before I finally say, "Delila. Our fabrication wasn't real. Dominic Stranger being that to her wasn't real. Delila used Dominic for whatever reason. Us taking her and putting her in that cell wasn't real. It was all part of Delila's fabrication. She made us think Dominic was the issue. From the grave, *she played us fucking all!*"

"It wasn't her fault, Keaton!" Kyrin's next to speak, but I don't want to hear what he has to say. "She was played too."



Twenty-Three

Cartier

I stand at the edge of the cliff, watching the waves crash against the pale stone. It reminds me of the anger I felt the day I was told what I needed to do. What I must do. The first task of me taking seat as CEO was to protect Midnight Mayhem and Kiznitch. At all costs. Even at my own.

“You made it?” Her voice is the whisper of a memory that I haven’t seen in a long time but have known was always there. It was perfectly planned, it always would be. Trick the trickster, beat The Brothers, *be who I needed to be*. Even if it meant removing my memories to do it.

I turn slowly, tucking my stray hair behind my ear. “Delila,” I say, squinting against the sunlight. “So strange to see you out in the outside world like this finally.”

Dove steps out from behind her, with Kohen on the other side. I swallow past the betrayal from the two of them. The betrayal I’ve had to hold on to for years upon years without realizing.

Dove has blue and pink paint smudged over the sides of her face, and Kohen has dark to match hers. For years, I’ve known she’s watched

Midnight Mayhem from the crowd. I've never understood why, and she's never told me either.

"Yes, well, I guess it is." She clamps the metal handcuffs around my wrists, jerking me forward. "Come on, our Little Bee. It's time." She yanks me forward and I follow behind her like a lost lamb to be slaughtered. Delila hid her death from everyone, and she doesn't know that I know why. She and Kaius had been working together from the second she 'died', maybe even before. I know King and The Brothers will be angry at me right now because they won't understand.

There was no me being kidnapped by them. Me being raised with Dominic. The memories Delila created with Dominic weren't true. Part of me is angry that it worked, that I agreed to give her the opportunity to do this to me. I gave her my sanity on a silver platter and she took it like a hungry wolf. The other part of me is angry that they truly believed they hadn't known me all of their life. Like I wasn't embedded into each of their souls as deep as they were in mine, but then I remember why. Why I had agreed to do it.

The sun ducks behind a fat dark cloud and a chill spreads over my spine. Delila directs us toward a waiting white SUV, and Dove and Kohen take the one behind her. A man opens the back seat and I slide in without arguing, keeping my head resting on the window. Doors close and we're driving away from the cliff top.

"Do they know where you are?" Delila asks, and I just shake my head. "Very good. They'll keep chasing Dominic's tail so we won't have any hiccups."

"Why do you want Midnight Mayhem so bad?" I turn toward her. She's aged a lot since I last saw her, and her hair is much longer too. Delila was always so prim and put together. In opulent suits and Jimmy Choos, she walked the line of boss lady with grace, yet somewhere down that path, she lost her way. "You had Midnight Mayhem, Delila. Why?"

"Oh, Cartier. You still have so much to learn when it comes to The Fathers. We're going to take over. Get rid of all the acts and rebuild new ones." The road is bumpy beneath my butt. "We got what we wanted." The smile on her face is far from anything happy. "Got rid of Patience so we can take their pipeline."

"Money? Sex trafficking? Slavery? That's the kind of shit you want to turn Midnight Mayhem into?"

Her shoulder lifts slightly in a shrug. “Not for money more than power, but the money is a bonus. This is what we needed to take us to the next level. We want to be where notorious cliques like The Elite Kings are.”

“They don’t dabble in sex trafficking...” I sneer, but I try not to make it obvious.

“Well no, but this is what is going to take us there. I just have to meet Kaius before we all fly to the US.” I have no doubt in my mind that she has every intention of killing everyone in Mayhem. Everyone but Maya, because as much of a monster as Delila is, she loved Maya’s father. She loves Maya. I’ll believe that forever.

They continue to drive us through the busy city and around people crossing the road. We pass small shops and kids playing on the street until we reach the end of a back road. There’s a set of doors that open out onto concrete steps and a bin right beside it. It looks like the back of a club.

“Kaius should be here any minute.”

“So, just to clarify...” My eyes move to the rearview mirror, where a set of headlights beam onto my face from behind. Kohen and Dove wait in their vehicle. “It’s been you and Kaius working behind Midnight Mayhem all along. You worked with Patience until we killed them. You did all of this for the chance to rewrite Midnight Mayhem and make it—Patience two-point-oh?” I shuffle around to face her. “Why, Delila? And what about Dominic and Bam Bam?”

“Ahh...” She reaches forward and her long, pointed nail grazes over my arm. I yank away from her. “Sweet Bam Bam. He always did have such a soft spot for you, didn’t he?”

Past

The door swung open, and a man stood on the other side. He wore an immaculate suit, had perfectly styled hair, and had the most perfect features. He was beautiful.

Kenny stopped, his head jerking up to see who had entered. “What are you doing here, Bam Bam?”

Bam Bam? I thought to myself. What an interesting name.

Bam Bam slowly made his way into the room, his eyes shifting from me to Kenny and Kaius. “I’ve come to let you know that *I* will be doing her

training for this during year two.” Kenny slowly shuffled off my body, and as soon as his weight was off me, I could breathe a little more. “And I’m sure I do not have to tell you what that means, Kaius?” Both men stared at each other in silent conversation.

Bam Bam pointed to both of them. “Let this be a warning. I do not like my toys played with. If you ever touch her again, I’ll cut both of your eyeballs out and stitch them back in after I’ve swapped them.” His mouth was wide when he smiled. “Do you understand the words I’ve just said?” His demeanor was cool and calm. He could have been talking about the weather and not about mutating two men.

“Understood, Bam Bam.” Kaius was the first to agree, tossing a sheet onto my body. “I have to ask, though. How did you get this gig? This is for Kiznitch only. I can’t imagine Delila allowing you in?”

Bam Bam’s grin widened farther as he reached the end of the bed and took my hand with his. “Don’t you worry about that, Kaius.”

Present

I swallow the memories of Bam Bam saving me from Kaius, but welcome what year two brought me with him. I spent the entire year living under his roof with the false pretense of learning sexual manipulation of the mind, body, and soul, but instead, Bam Bam saved me. He allowed me to be a teenager. Live my life while providing me with core fundamental values that I would need when I got out. I owe Bam Bam my life.

“Yes, and I him,” I say, straightening my shoulders. “You know he’s a King, don’t you? And that he posed as Kiznitch after seeing Kaius and Kenny hurt me. He was there for a job that night. Do you know what that job was, Delila?” I hold her stare, but she doesn’t back down. She continues her same smug smile. “It was to assassinate Kaius. He wanted to, but he wanted to save me more.” I shifted in my chair, watching the rearview mirror. “Do you know why Eli was with Dominic, Delila?” I keep my words slow and shallow so she can keep up. “Because after Bam Bam failed his mission, I was supposed to be the cost of that. To live with Dominic and dance for him. Dominic came to collect me, but Eli stood in for me instead, until he figured out why Dominic wanted me so bad. I mean, sure, annoying that Bam Bam hadn’t killed Kaius, but why would he

want me?" I click my fingers together. "Then it hit me. You had Dominic under your thumb all along, like you did me. Like you did The Brothers. *Like you did Kissime.*" Her face finally falls and I see the exact moment she knows I've worked her out...

Past Kissime

The day I was saved. I often think about the moment he pulled me from the lake and breathed life back into my lungs after my own mother took them out. After breathing in water for minutes on end, she thought I was dead. Success in her need to kill me, she shoved my head beneath the water and left me there to decay.

But I didn't.

Because I was pulled out with a grip around my neck, lips on mine, and life given back to me. I remember waking and looking up at two dark eyes hidden behind a curtain of wet hair that fell over his forehead. Who was this beautiful creature, and was I dead? I wasn't sure.

"What's your name?" he huffed as if he'd just swum a marathon, and maybe he had.

I pushed up on my arms, looking around the place, and tried to piece together the puzzle of what had just happened. "Kissime. My name's Kissime. Where am I?" I asked, coming back to the boy. He reminded me of a fallen angel. He had razor-sharp cheekbones, a prominent jawline, the deepest eyes, and straight white teeth.

"You're at The Castle in New York. I've never seen you before. What are you doing here?"

He stood up and made his way to his idling bike, grabbing a hoodie from the chair and shoving it over my head. "I've never been here myself. It's—" My mind caught up with me and memories flipped through my brain like a reel. "My mother. She tried to kill me!" I spun around to make sure she wasn't still there. I was now on the other side of the water, beneath tall trees and thick shrubs.

"Who's your mom?" the boy asked, searching my features. He did this thing where he'd look right into my soul.

"Delila," I answered softly. "Delila Petrova."

I hated those memories. Fuck, but I hated them. Delila hid me all my life, and when I performed the worst thing I could have ever done, she tried to kill me. Discard me as if I was nothing but trash. Until he found me. Keaton put me back in Kiznitch and gave life back to me that I thought I'd never have. He became somewhat of a brother to me.

But now I had to tell him. I had to tell him the full story of what I did that day Delila killed me, and she was back. She was back and ready.

I found his name in my phone and pressed the call button. He answered after four rings.

"Hey, I'm up in the air right now, so I might cut out. What's up?"

"There's something I need to tell you."

There's a long pause. "So speak..."

"The day you found me at the lake, Delila had tried to get me to agree to put a blanket memory over seven people. I didn't think much of it at the time. She wanted me to mess up their heads and move memories around and fabricate new ones. I told her no. She tried to kill me and you know the rest."

"You're not making sense, Kissime."

I sighed, patting the head of my cat as she purred against my palm. "Those people—those people were you and the other Brothers, Cartier Nero, Kenan, and Dominic Stranger, I think."

"Why are you just now telling me this?" he ground out. I could feel his anger through the phone and I didn't blame him.

"Because I just got the memories back, Keaton. I did it. I did what she asked me to do before she changed my memories to make me think I hadn't." A single tear fell from my eye. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I've just remembered, but I have."

He hung up the phone and I fell to the ground, my heart splitting open in my chest. I didn't want to hurt him. I never wanted to hurt him.

Crawling across the ground, I scrubbed my tears away angrily and pulled out a piece of paper. Cartier wouldn't remember what this was until she read it out loud. She'd have her memories back, and then could unfold The Brothers from there.

The cherry...

Cartier

Present

I remember everything. The second Kissime cornered me at The Village one day. We had talked for an hour before she did what she did. We laughed. I thought I had a friend. Someone I could be friends with *finally* after my failed attempts. When she asked me about an old memory that always made me smile, I told her of the story Keaton told me when I was younger, about the old symbolism of a cherry. *"In our messed-up way, the cherry will always symbolize mine and Keaton's bond. We grew as a pair from the earth and shared the same flesh and blood, but when one is disconnected from the other, we will eventually rot and die. I'll rot... and die."*

"You..." I point toward her. "You made Dominic want me. Take Eli as a distraction, all while you what, Delila? What was your plan at the end? Fucking power?"

Delila cackles a laugh so evil it leaves teeth marks down my spine. "You've had it all from the beginning, Ice Queen. You had the respect from The Brothers, you had the adoration from The Fathers, you had the protection from The Mothers, the love from your sisters. *You* have not known pain. Not true pain. Not the kind of pain that Midnight Mayhem took from me."

"Delila." The word catches in my throat. "Maya is in such a good place. I can't have her knowing what you have become."

"And she won't." Delila's cold eyes come to mine. "Because she'll be dead." Her admission leaves a stale taste at the back of my throat. Has she gone so far down the rabbit hole that she would kill Maya? Maya, who has always been so close to her mother?

I sigh, unclipping my belt and hitting end on the call that was live in my pocket, still connected with The Brothers. "Kaius isn't coming, Delila." I have about six seconds to get from here to that exit door, and I know I won't make it. Kohen is a good shot, and although I would like to think he wouldn't kill me, for Dove he would. He would do anything for her. She comes above everyone and everything. I have no misconception about Delila. I know she plans to kill me just like she plans to kill everyone in Midnight Mayhem.

“What are you talking about?” She shifts to the side, looking to the back window. “He most definitely is coming.”

“He is not. He is dead.” I say the words slow enough to catch her reaction. It’s as satisfying as I hoped.

Her face whips to me and she raises her hand up to slap me across my face when her door is reared open and she’s falling backward.

Kohen is glaring down at her, a knife held against her chest. “Change of plans, lady love.” My door opens, a gust of wind twirling in behind me.

I turn to face Dove and her head tilts to the side. “What? You didn’t think we would let you die, would you?” I don’t know what to think. Dove is inconsistent. She’s one thing, but then another. The only person I know she is loyal to is Kohen, and likewise.

“I don’t know, Dove...” My eyes narrow on her. “Would you?” She cackles a loud laugh before skipping off behind the back of the SUV and around to Kohen. I’m sliding out the back seat, massaging my wrists when two black SUVs skid to a stop behind ours.

Fuck. I’m in trouble.

Doors fling open and I watch as Keaton shoves his way through Kyrin, his eyes on me. I swallow roughly, my throat contracting around my nerves. Keaton has always been a storm that hovers without rain. He doesn’t need to be dramatic with his rage, because everyone knows once they stand beneath his shadow, they can feel him. His wrath, anger, and lack of restraint when it comes to his energy. Keaton is a weapon in human form, and he utilizes it frequently to release his urges. Up until now, I’ve liked it. Almost relished in it. There’s a sick part of me that likes the touch of a killer, knowing he softens his edges for me.

Now I’m not so sure.

“Keaton, I can—” A hand is clenched around my throat before I’m slammed back against the car I just slid out of. My airways close around me as he lifts me from the ground. I cling onto his arm that’s holding my throat, feeling his veins pulse beneath my palm.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” His mouth is against the curve of my neck, the warmth of his breath massaging my flesh. “I fucking knew you were hiding shit.”

Tapping his arm, I suck in a deep breath before he drops me carefully to the ground. Heaving, I massage my throat as I take deep breaths in and out, leaning over.

“You could have fucking died, Cartier!” Keaton is still standing opposite me, but he’s not whispering anymore. It’s probably the most he’s raised his voice at me in the entire time I’ve known him. Which is all my life. Much to his surprise.

“I’m—” I breathe in. “I didn’t know what else to do”—breathe out—“I did it for you all.” His fist flies into the car and I wince, finally standing straight and facing him.

“You could have told me sooner,” he whispers, taking a step closer.

I take one back.

He points right in my face. “You should have told me.”

Then he’s gone, leaving me with my thoughts. My regret. Did I do what I was supposed to do? Did I betray too many people at once? Probably. But it’s no less than what they all do to people.

Stepping around the car, I pause when I see Kyrin and Eli. The corner of Kyrin’s eyes wrinkle as he smiles tensely at me. He’s angry. *Maybe*. He takes a step closer to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me in to place a kiss on my head.

“I should have known. He should have known. That’s why he’s mad. This isn’t on you. I should have known.” His whisper is soft and tears well in my eyes when the comfort of my brother’s energy drowns me. I need him. He’s the rock of my life and the end all of my existence. “I should have known. I’m sorry.” His whispers get lost in the back of my mind because Eli is behind me, his arms around my waist.

I turn my back on Kyrin, bringing my hands to Eli’s face. “I’m sorry for what she did to you. I’m sorry.”

Eli shakes his head. “Don’t. There’s more than that. I’ll explain when we get out of here.” Turning back around, I bump into Kyrin, who’s staring down at me with his brows pulled in and his frown low.

“He’ll forgive you one day.”

Breathing out a long-held breath, I find Keaton near Dove, King, and Kenan. “No, he won’t.”

When I was twelve, I remember my mother telling me about the day I was born. She said there was a commotion. People she didn’t want were in the room—Kaius included—and told me that when I ever had a baby, that she would make sure my privacy was protected. She told me Dhalia took me from her straight after birth, and for a brief second, she thought

someone was trying to steal me. They weren't. She was just wrapping me in my cotton wrap, but I remember her telling me this story, and it stuck. It stuck in my mind so well that I confided in Delila with it. Like I did so many other times because I thought she was a friend. A kind of mother figure.

There's no simplicity to forgiveness. The pieces of the puzzle won't always fit. I don't expect any of them to forgive me for hiding what I found out, but betrayal is an emotion weaved with simplicity. Betrayal is poison, and once you taste it, you can't get it out.

I haven't spoken to anyone since boarding the plane. Kyrin said that everyone was sent back to New York, and that that was where we were headed now with Delila caged in the luggage department. We're an hour and a half in the air, and I can't sit still, so I open my phone to check my messages.

Dhalia: I hope you know that since Kaius is gone, everything falls on your lap. I don't envy you at all, Cartier. You are still a child. I think you made the right choice doing what you did, playing with The Brothers until they took his life, but I do also think you made it prematurely. What are you wanting for Midnight Mayhem? You need to sit and think about that before making any irrational decisions.

I leave her a message. I didn't think of it irrationally. Killing Kaius had to happen, and although she won't know all of the details yet, she will soon. Kaius was poison ivy growing throughout Midnight Mayhem.

Perse: Is everything ok?

Saskia: I need you all home in one piece...

Maya: Love you, Little C!

Rose: You've always been this annoying little turd, but we love you. All of you.

I swipe out of all of their messages, not wanting to read any others. Tears threaten to surface, but I force them back down. I don't want anyone to see me weak, even though I know the people around me are my family. I would do it all over again to protect them. *All. Over. Again.*

The lights are all out, except for little LED lights that lead down the pathway to the back of the plane. Up ahead, there are more lights that

shimmy a soft lilac, but not enough for it to be annoying.

Unclipping my belt, I move out of my chair and tiptoe down the long aisle. I don't want to wake anyone, but I also don't know where Keaton is, and I know that if he finds me before I head downstairs, there's no way I'm making it. I can see the curtain cracked open slightly with light peeking through when I pick up my footsteps. My hand reaches the material of the curtain just as another clenches around the back of my neck, paralyzing me in place.

"And where..." His mouth is on the curve of my neck where my shoulder meets. "The fuck do you think you're going?"

"To the bathroom," I lie.

His chuckle is deep, but it scatters over my flesh like a warning. "You're getting a little too comfortable lying to me, Tigger." He shoves me forward. "Walk." I squint my eyes when the bright light beams, walking around the bar and to the door that leads downstairs. My fingers twitch when I know I'm close. I start walking down the stairs as the sound of the jet engines becomes so loud I can't hear myself think. I know he's still there. He's always there. Oxygen becomes tight as I find myself sucking in deeper breaths, my chest heavy with fatigue. Sweat slides down my temple once I hit the floor and my eyes fly around the place to find Delila. I have questions and anger that I'd love to take out on her, but she's not there.

The door up above closes and suddenly I'm aware of where I am. Suitcases and equipment are tied on top of crates, and there are ropes hanging from the ceiling to hold cars or other heavy cargo. Blinking to get better sight, I reach aimlessly to the side for another piece of rope. The only lighting is a red light flashing overhead. Spinning around, I go running back up the stairs when I slam into Keaton's chest.

"You know the best thing about finally seeing through all the smoke and mirrors with you? The best thing about finding out that what I thought was true was a lie?" He unwinds a roll of rope and my teeth sink into my bottom lip to stop from smirking. "The fact that I get to punish you." He wraps the rope around his wrist. "Undress."

I hook my finger beneath my t-shirt and pull it over my head, dropping it onto the ground. The sides of his jaw flex when he clenches his teeth as I flick the button of my jeans undone and shimmy them down, kicking them aside. Stepping forward, I press my finger against his chest slightly, but he whacks my hand away and glares at me.

“Naked, Cartier. All of you.” His eyes swirl with darkness that I’ve always craved from him. That forbidden forest that I’m sure I will burn in.

Reaching around my back, I blindly flick off the clasp to my bra before sliding my G-string down my thighs until it rests around my ankles. Stepping out of it, I watch him closely as those same eyes that are the last thing some people see penetrate over my flesh with every movement. Holding my breath, I wait for his next move. Uncoiling the rope, he moves it over my head before turning me around so my back is to him. Closing my eyes to shut out the outside noise, I try to calm my erratic breathing every time his grazed knuckles touch my skin. The feeling of the rope tightening around my body has my thighs clenching together and my heart rate picking up. Rope against skin, his bare knuckles graze my inner thigh when he loops a tight knot. Dampness pools between my thighs when the rope pulls on either side of my pussy. I keep my eyes closed when he runs his hands up the backs of my thighs, goose bumps breaking out over my flesh and never leaving. He moves his touch over my ass cheek before gripping the back of the Hishi Karada harness, yanking me back so hard I almost lose my footing. With my hands tied to the back, he shoves my head down so I’m bending over and smacks me hard across my ass cheek, slightly lower over my pussy.

“I need to hurt you.”

My eyes roll to the back of my head before I look over my shoulder. “Then hurt me.” Those are bittersweet words when you’re saying them to someone like Keaton. A man who is very capable of hurting you, not just superficially either—but truly hurting you.

His finger slides between my folds, and I fight a moan when he twirls it deep inside. “Might lose control.”

“I trust you.” I sigh, riding against his finger. He retracts and moves backward, and I instantly feel his presence leave and return when I feel cool metal glide over my ass. Looks like I’m the type of girl who tells a killer she trusts him when he’s clearly in the middle of wanting a fucking murder binge.

The palm of his hand glides over my back and my skin prickles with anticipation. The sting comes first, but the pleasure chases it like a cat does a mouse. Fire erupts over my ass cheek from the metal, but he cups my pussy with his hand and massages my clit.

“Fuck. You look real good, baby.” His affirmations wrap around my mind like candy. Pushing against his crotch, I bite down on my lip when his hard cock glides down the crack of my ass. “Real fucking good.” He guides the tip of his dick over my entrance and pushes in. I don’t bother fighting my moan when his girth contracts around my tightness. The friction of his dick pulling back when he slowly extracts has my nails digging into the palm of my hand, desperate for release. Cum slips down my inner thigh when he slams into me again, harder this time. He grabs me by the rope behind my back and uses it to direct my body against his, bucking his hips into my ass with every thrust. Everything is almost too much. The feeling of him inside of me is like snorting cocaine. It bumps me higher and higher until I can’t go any farther. The rope between my thighs grazes my clit as he pounds relentlessly into me with hard thrusts. Our bodies slapping together violently fill the air, and I can’t help the loud screams that tear from my throat.

“Keaton...” My whole body ignites as fire rips through my veins when my orgasm frizzles through me in waves.

Tugging on the rope, he slams into me one last time before crashing on top of me as his cock pulses inside. His heavy breathing, our sweaty bodies—the silence. We stay the same for seconds. Minutes. Before we finally get to our feet.

Keaton points to me, picking up my shirt and tossing it at my chest. “You’re lucky I don’t hook you up to that suspension and leave you there for the rest of the trip.” He pauses and I squeeze my head out of the hole of my shirt. “Trust me, Cartier, I’m still seriously considering it.”

I shove my hands through my shirt. “Making me leave the bondage on for the rest of the trip is torture enough, thanks.” Snatching my jeans up from the floor, I shove my legs into each side and do the buttons up quickly.

He steps forward, his hand on my chin. I close my eyes. Having him near me has become a necessity, and I’m painfully aware of how volatile that is. Loving Keaton isn’t supposed to be easy, but it is supposed to be mine to do.

“I’m sorry, baby.” I rest further into his embrace, my heart pounding against my chest. I think my relief of finally finding out everything outweighs my need to be more upset with him. There’s a kind of calm that has subdued my panic. All the chaos we’ve both endured over the years will be finally turned into gas to help us reign. Help *me* reign.

“For which part?” I bat my lashes up at him but can’t help the playful smirk on my lips. “The you making me think you’re in love with some bitch, or for one of the other one hundred reasons you should be sorry?” His eyes fall to my mouth, mirroring my same grin.

“You thought I was in love with her?” His dark brow curves upward, hitting his hairline.

“Well... yes?”

He shakes his head, pulling me under his arm. “There’s only one girl walking this earth who can say that about me.” His lips brush my temple. “Any more secrets that I’ll find out through anyone else?”

I open my eyes to his. “No.”

He kisses my forehead and takes my hand in his. “Good. Then you don’t need to worry being my next tattoo.”

I laugh nervously, but he doesn’t put my mind at ease by saying he’s joking.

“You’re joking, right?” I squeeze his hand with mine. He pushes open the door and leaves me to walk through first, staring me down as I pass him. “Right?”



Twenty-Four

Keaton

Past

It was possible to crave things without realizing it. I liked the taste of something you shouldn't have. How it felt to drink from the cup of the forbidden. Cartier had always been that to me, and it had nothing to do with the fact that she was my best friend's sister.

"Keaton!" my mom yelled from downstairs. I continued to flick the blade around my fingers, watching as blood trickled down the stainless sharp lines. *"No. Please. Don't."* His body shuffled across the gravel road, kicking up dust and rocks to float around the high beams of my car lights. *"Who are you? What do you want?"* His hand covered his eyes and I tilted my head, studying his fight-or-flight. He didn't have much of either inside of him. *"Please don't kill me. I have done bad things, but I paid for them! I did my time!"* He went to shoot up from the ground and break through the clearing of the paddock.

One.

Two.

Three.

He didn't run very fast. I flicked my knife around my fingers and reared my arm back, aiming it straight for his head. His body fell to the grass with a thud.

There's a knock on my door and I turned to face it, to see my mom standing at the threshold, leaning on the edge with a knowing look on her face. "You're home late." Kiznitch mothers. They're all fucked up one way or another, but one thing they all had in common was how much they loved their children. At least, that's what Ash always said.

"I didn't know I had a curfew." I moved my eyes from the blade up to her face.

Ash tilted her head to the side before coming farther into my room. She sat on the mattress and wrapped her hand around mine, taking the blade from me. "How many this week?" I watched as her sharp side profile moved when she swallowed. As if it pained her to ask. I knew it did, because out of everyone in Kiznitch, Ash had the most humanity. God was punishing her by giving her me as a son. She had humanity, and I took it.

"Not enough," I answered hoarsely, standing and pulling my shirt over my head from the back of the collar.

She dropped the blade onto the bed, wiping her hands on her pants. "Well, make sure you're ready for the tour. I think you all leave tomorrow." When she stood, she leaned up on her tippy toes and brought her lips to my cheek. "I love you. I'm sorry I'm not more involved in Kiznitch than you probably would have liked, but you know, I—"

"—Mom..." I hardly called her mom. It's more because I didn't think I deserved to call her that. She deserved a better son, or even daughters. I wished God gave her better. "I don't care about any of that bullshit." I understood why. Having my dad walking around with his dick out everywhere wouldn't be helpful either. "I'm fine." She patted my shoulder before turning to leave my room.

Unbuttoning my jeans, I flipped the lamp on and turned off the main light when Cartier walked around the corner into my room. I paused, looking around her. "What's wrong?"

"I'm drunk and bored." She danced her way onto my bed, seeing the bloody knife sitting on the cover. Her little blue eyes slowly came up to mine as she reached for the handle. "You wanna drink with me?"

I leaned forward and took the knife from her. "I'm good."

Turning to the side, she placed her bottle on the bedside table and swung her legs back off the bed. She was fourteen now and growing way too fucking fast. We all protected her, but until when? She was going to stop listening to us one way or another.

Leaning down in front of me, she peered up at me from her knees and I snapped my head to the left, shutting down all thoughts that scratched the surface of my brain having her in front of me like that. *Fuck.*

Standing to her full height, she raised the bloody shirt in front of herself. "I'll go wash this. Get changed." Instantly, she had shifted out of drunk and bored and into taking care of Keaton after he'd slaughtered some humans. She was painfully good at keeping my demons company, and they liked having her in their space. Just her. To the point where they'd want to seek her out after every kill. Kind of like they needed reassurance that I could still have this one good thing even though I did so much bad.

I took the shirt back, but instead of her releasing it, I ended up pulling her into my chest. Cartier was always that annoying young sister to the other Brothers, but she'd never been that person to me. I liked taking care of her in a way; it was my apology for being who I was.

"It's fine, Tigger. What are you doing here?" I flung the bloody shirt into the trash can near my study table and made my way into the bathroom adjacent to my bedroom. I knew she was going to follow me around like a lost little cub. There was a reason I gave her the nickname Tigger. She wore the cloak of a tiger—fierce, protective, loud—but she's also fucking hyperactive and didn't know when to shut the fuck up.

After flicking on the faucet, I spun around to see her leaning on the door. "I told you. I wanted to get you drunk with me! Kyrin is being bossy, and since I'm about to turn fifteen, I could do with a not-so-bossy brother." She batted her lashes up at me, a smile broad on her face. She always had these two perfect dimples on each cheek that distracted me from whatever thoughts were always rushing through my mind.

I stared down at her. "I'm not your brother, Tigger."

Her eyes widened, then her cheeks flushed red. "You're the only one who always re-assures me of that, Vlad the Impaler." She took the steps backward but kept her eyes on mine. "Guess I'm going to go find someone else to get drunk with me." Even though we're on Kiznitch land in The Village, her words still managed to work their way under my skin.

“Good luck!” I yelled to her back as she laughed her way out of my room. Mumbling under my breath while kicking my jeans off, I finished, “Everyone knows I’ll fucking kill them if they hurt you, anyway. Brat.”

Present

I stare down at Delila, curled in a ball in the corner of her cage. It didn’t take long for us to get her here and unload her shit and her two little soldiers she had working for her. The Village’s bunker is exactly for this. To extract information when needed and then incinerate the evidence.

To the right of me, sitting relaxed in a chair, is Killian, and beside him is Kyrin. King is walking down the long corridor, hanging up his phone when he’s near us. His heavy boots slap against the hard concrete, and I know that whomever he was just on a call with pissed him off.

“What?” I snap, unable to take any more fucking surprises.

“It’s Cartier. She’s coming down after she has sorted out the other crew they had started.”

“By sorting out, you mean?” I stand, straightening my shoulders as Kyrin shoots up from his chair. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, she’s bringing them here and we will figure it all out.”

“You mean you let her go alone?” Kyrin grinds out, and I have to give it to him. He’s getting better at loosening the leash.

“Your little psycho is a lot more capable than you idiots think,” Delila interrupts through a croaky voice, crawling across the pavement until her long fingers wrap around the prison cell. “Trust me.”

I tilt my head down at her. “Why the fuck would we trust you?”

“Because I fucking trained her...” Her smirk is wide on her face, and for a second, I forget she’s not on our side anymore. “Like I trained you how to keep your demons in check. Don’t you remember, Keaton? Tell me...” She narrows her eyes, and I feel anger bubbling inside of me. “Do you use what I showed you on her?”

“Shut up, bitch. You forgot I know how to bleed someone from the inside out?” My mouth curves upward when her smile falls. “Mmhmm, thought so.”

“Jesus.” Killian massages his temples. “Maya can’t know that Delila is down here. To Maya, her mother died when she died.”

“Her mother is right here—” Delila raises her hand through the cell and I rear my foot back and kick it away with my boot.

“Not for long.”

Delila rolls around, turning her back to us. “I’ve told you all everything I know. Kaius and I had a plan to start a new crew. It was always our idea to take out Patience and take over their practices. Their profit margin was four times what Midnight Mayhem’s was. Money isn’t forever, and Midnight Mayhem was becoming more expensive every year. It was our way out.” She takes a deep breath. “The idea to have Cartier replace me was orchestrated too. I mean, it was perfect. Someone young and naive, someone we could manipulate while someone who you all gave so much of a fuck about that we knew she would always be safe. That was—”

“—until you found out she’s not as fucking naive as you think?” I finish for her, unable to hide the smug sound in my tone.

“Correct.” Delila coughs, spinning back around to face us all. “We thought up the Eli with Dominic thing the second we found out about Bam Bam protecting her. It was perfect. Dominic Stranger, an old King. In Eli’s world, no one would have guessed. We needed you all distracted when the time came—when the time was here for us to do the takeover. But unfortunately...”

“Unfortunately, you didn’t expect me to cloud The Brothers with their own tricks and have a trigger for them to regain all of their memories at a simple rhyme.” Kissime enters through the doors, her footsteps slow and meek. “You didn’t think I was still alive, and you thought even if I was, you had wiped my memories of what I had done for you. You forgot what your trigger was to pull me out.” Kissime pauses slightly to the side of me. “It was Maya, Delila. Maya’s voice, something you thought I would never hear—ever—was the trigger to pull me out.” She turns to face me, her wide eyes stuck to mine. “Maya had called Amie’s phone to get her hair done for the tour when you would all be in Kiznitch. She knew she’d have to fight Cartier for her time. That’s how I heard her voice, and I called you straight away once I got every memory back.”

Kissime is my other apology. I didn’t mean for it to drag out the way it did, but she’s ended up becoming someone I care about, to an extent. Enough to protect her anyway, and try to keep her safe. If it wasn’t for Delila, hell, it probably wasn’t even for her more than it was for Maya. Maya’s family, and anyone connected to her, fits into that slot too.

Except Delila.

I nod at Kissime. “You did well, Isme. Go up to the lake house. I’ll see you up there soon.” Now that she’s free and no longer needs to hide, I plan to put her into Midnight Mayhem. I just have to figure out where.

Not long after Kissime is gone, I hear the loud clink of heels slap over the pavement. Instinctively, I step between Cartier and Delila. I don’t want her anywhere near this crazy bitch, even if there is a big part of me that is beginning to see that my girl is even crazier. “Why can’t I find the other crew? I’m going to fucking kill you.” Cartier ignores my presence and kneels down directly in front of Delila.

Delila cackles and it reminds me of an old witch. “Oh, so quick to jump. Tell me...” I can hear it in her tone. The cockiness she’s exuding.

My phone starts blaring.

King’s phone starts.

Killian’s.

Cartier’s.

Delila continues. “Did you not think I would have a plan B?”



Twenty-Five

Cartier

As soon as the words leave her mouth, I reach for my phone in my back pocket and swipe it to answer when I see Jordan's name. "What?"

"Cartier, it's the show."

"What about it?" I snap, looking around The Brothers when I see them all finally answering their own phones.

"There's been a fire of some sort... multiple deaths..." My phone slips from my hand as white noise fills my mind. Shoving Keaton down onto the chair, I reach into his jacket and flick off the lock to his holster, snatching the knife that I know is always there. His. The same one I've seen since I was a little kid. Ignoring the yelling in the background, and King and Killian rushing down the corridor to check on Saskia and Perse, I kick the lock of the cell with my red bottom heel and pull the door open so fast Delila falls onto her back in a fit of laughter.

Straddling her, I rest Keaton's knife against her throat, my eyes wild and my blood so hot I think it's going to explode out of me. "*What did you do...*"

Delila's mouth curves upward. "You knew what I could do, and you knew Dove was mine, and you knew Kohen was hers. What did you think

would happen, Cartier? One last *fuck you*. Perfect, wasn't it?" I put pressure on the handle of the blade.

"Baby..."

Harder. Until I watch as her skin separates over her throat and blood spills out of the cut. I keep going. Blood gushing over my hands, over the ground, with the only sound her choking on her own blood. Arms wrap around my torso, lifting me up from her body as tears flow down my cheek. Death. So many hurt. *I was supposed to protect them all.*

Keaton turns me into his chest, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me across the room. Falling into the crook of his neck, I sob into him. "I was supposed to protect them."

"Shhh." He holds me by the back of the neck gently, removing the knife from my hand like one would a maniac. "It's okay. Everyone is going to be fine."

Kyrin mumbles to someone in the background, but I continue to jerk through my cries as Keaton carries me down the corridor and up the trap door steps. The moonlight wraps around me like a blanket. I let my sobs die out against Keaton's chest. I should have done more. More to protect everyone, but I was so caught up in what was happening I lost my way, which was exactly what Delila wanted.

"Do we have an update?" Keaton asks Kyrin as he walks me across the field. I don't know where we're headed, and I'm not sure I'm ready to face everyone knowing I failed them. I could have stopped this. I knew more than anyone what was happening. *I could have stopped this.*

"Yeah, it's not good. Multiple fatalities, some civilians since it was during the show. I've got Eli heading there now to meet with Bishop since it was a show in Riverside."

I gasp, squeezing Keaton's shirt. His big hand clenching my thigh reassuringly. Riverside isn't far from The Village in NYC, but right now it feels like a world away. "Who all died?"

"We don't know yet, T. Stop blaming yourself. There's nothing you could have done." Usually my brother's words are a comfort. This time they just feel like a lie a parent tells their child when they know they did something wrong.

"Put me down." I tap Keaton's shoulder and he slides me to the ground as we reach the Axtons' mansion. It's lit up brighter than I've ever seen it, and there are cars out the front I don't recognize.

The backyard gate is open and we step through, passing the pool and guest house, following the trail that leads to the back door. Keaton opens it and I step through first, quickly seeing who is in here with us.

Perse is in the corner swiping her tears.

Kenan is beside her.

Lilith beside him.

Brantley Vitiosis is opposite with a glass hanging between his fingers, looking up at the ceiling with another man beside him I don't recognize. Maya, Rose, and Callan are on the other end, with a couple of the other girls who do the aerial.

"Why was there a show?" the words fly out of my mouth before I can catch them. "I specifically said no shows! How was there a show without The Brothers? What the fuck!" I spin around when the door opens and Eli walks through with Bishop on his tail. "Talk to me."

Eli's face falls slightly. "It seems that Dove and Kohen had told a few sets that they could do a show in Riverside. A tent was already set up with equipment, but it wasn't ours. It was from the other crew. From whom I spoke with, it looks like—" Eli blows out a breath, finding Perse. I watch as her eyes turn wide, seeking the answer I know she wants to hear. Her shoulders fall. "There was a show. Well, somewhat of a show. The Angels and Demons were hit, as well as a few dancers. From what they've said, Kohen and Dove were the last act, and during that final act, they shot fire into the crowd, into the backstage, and then finally each other. It was a suicide mission. Perse, fuck, I'm so sorry." Perse bursts out into tears, launching from her chair and running up the grand staircase. The kitchen falls silent for a moment, and I stare blankly at where Perse left.

"How many casualties?" I ask absently as The Brothers all fall quiet around us. As much as Kohen wasn't a Brother of Kiznitch, I know that it will still sting for them. Especially for King.

Eli is in front of me in a flash, his hands on my cheeks. I feel Keaton stiffen beside me. "This isn't your fault."

"How many?" I demand, staring up at him.

"We're looking at roughly nineteen civilians and—" He looks between me and someone who is behind me. "All of the crew that was there." I feel like he's punched me in the gut and I fall backward, thankfully landing on an empty chair.

My hand is on my mouth. "Midnight Mayhem is over."

“Cartier, baby...” Keaton interrupts, kneeling down beside me.

I shake my head, my eyes on his. “No.” Looking around the room at everyone. My family. The people I trained for three years to protect. “The show is done.”

Two Weeks Later

I hadn’t thought much about what everyone would do once the show was finished. It gave people jobs. A way of life and living, yet somehow, I was the person who took it all away.

I’ve become a walking villain among The Village. No one talks to me. No one acknowledges me. The hardest part about being CEO is making the hard decisions. Why can’t anyone see why I’ve done what I’ve done? I know they’re not angry at me for the deaths, they’re angry at me for taking away the shows.

All week it has been press release after press release. We’ve had cops crawling all over us until their investigations could be complete, and thankfully, thanks to having The Kings, they didn’t sniff for long, but that does nothing for my conscience. I could have done something and I didn’t. I swear I could have.

I stare at my glass, moving my finger around the edges and closing my eyes when the music playing in the background hits all of the areas inside my mind that I’m hoping to bury.

“Didn’t think I’d see you here.” As much as I don’t really want to be here, I want to be here for Bam Bam. If you give your trauma the power, it will do just that all your life. I took mine back from him.

Chuckling into my glass, I raise it in the air, gesturing to the bartender that I’ll have another before sliding it across the sticky bar. “Me neither, to be honest, but what can I say... it’s the one place I know no one will look for me.”

“Providing...” Bam Bam slides into the seat beside me. He leans back on the bar, resting his elbows up and running his fingertip down my arm. “They *do* want to see you?”

Spinning around, I narrow my eyes on him. “Why are you here, Bam Bam? Why are *you* still with Dominic?” I know that Dominic is just as

much a victim as anyone else when it comes to Delila; it still bothers me, and I'm not ready to forgive him yet.

Bam Bam's smile widens, his hair out in a mess around his face. He looks out into the crowd, and I catch the lines of his profile. Sharp and defined jaw that leads to a pointed chin. His nose is slightly crooked from being broken too many times, but that's no surprise. He didn't get his name Bam Bam out of nowhere. "Since my sister died, I've made it my job to try to fix my father." He grabs the glass beside mine, and I slowly bring mine to my lips. Dominic is his father? "And if anyone is going to kill that man, it'll be me."

"I didn't know he was your father." I sip on the clear liquid, hissing when the alcohol stings the inside of my cheeks.

"No one did. I'm not part of his world or The Elite Kings world. Not until I found out about Bailey. I came back. Dominic has been problematic all his life, but I knew he didn't have shit to do with the Kiznitch mess." He tilts his head to give me his full attention. "You handle that?"

I raise an eyebrow before shooting back the rest. "You know I did."

Bam Bam laughs, smirking around his glass. There's a certain swagger that The Kings have that The Brothers almost match. It's strange, but The Kings just... you can spot them in a room full of people if you know what to look for. Bam Bam is rougher around the edges, but he most definitely fits the profile.

"So what? Why were you part of my training, hmmm?" I ask, running my fingers through my hair to rest my head on my palm. "Why were you there? Just to save little old me?"

Bam Bam turns his chair around to face me, spreading his leg wide. "You wanna know why I fucked you?"

I choke on my laugh because he isn't that funny. "No." I lean closer into him, so close I can smell the nicotine on his leather jacket. "I'm a Kiznitch, baby. We fuck. It's what we do." Leaning back, I roll my eyes. "I mean the other stuff. Why else were you there? The assignment and then saving me? That all?"

Dominic seems to be surprised before relaxing in his chair again. "Actually, yes. I was also bored." He winks at me. "It's not that deep, darlin'."

I laugh loud this time and it's a second before he's joining me.

“Go home, Cartier. Go and sort out your family and your empire. Start your shows again and do it right this time.” His eyes come to mine. “Don’t punish those around you because you’re battling wars inside.”

I breathe out a sigh, pushing up from my chair. “Why are you a cocky, wise asshole?”

His head dips and his eyes flash up at mine devilishly. “I’m a King, baby. It’s what we do.”

Pushing through the sea of bodies, I hit the front door and breathe in the fresh air, shuffling my long trench coat on and tying it at the front. I came tonight for a drink and to get away from the silence, sure, but I always wanted to double-check on Dominic and Bam Bam. Delila and her lies, you can never be sure. My black SUV pulls up to the curb and Jordan winds down the passenger window. “Come on. Time to go home.”

I slide into the back seat and pull out my phone, flicking through the photos. Tapping on Instagram, I open Midnight Mayhem’s page and take a quick shot with my blue hair spread over my shoulders and my tongue sticking out. Typing out the caption, I hit Post.

We’re fucking back.



Epilogue

Keaton

Two Years Later

I knew it. I knew she was going to be the death of me the second her little eyes looked up at me for the first time ever. And I was right because she's gone and done it this time.

"Cartier!" I call out as she zips through the dirt track at speeds way too fucking fast. I clench the wrapper in my hand and push my other two fingers into my mouth and whistle. It's no use. The little fucking shit sends it, flying up the ramp and flips backward into a La-Z-Boy, flipping me off with her free hands. After all the bullshit that happened with Delila, we burned The Castle down below The Village and turned it into one big riding paddock. It was fucking perfect for all of us since we'd worn out the old one.

She lands back onto the dirt and skids to a stop, removing her helmet and bouncing toward me with a smile. "What, grumpy? What's wrong?"

"Oh? What's wrong?" I flash the packet in front of her face, tilting my head to the side. "You're fucking pregnant, and you're riding like that?" Her smile falls instantly, grabbing the package out of my hands. "Tigger, what the fuck?"

“I’m not.” She shakes her head, and her blue hair falls over her shoulders. “I thought I was, but I’m not.” When the words leave her mouth, I try to ignore the way disappointment foils in my gut.

I reach for her hand, pulling her back against my chest. The smell of cooking meat and fried potatoes drifts over the cliff, and I know it’s almost time to head over to King and Perse’s for Sunday family dinner. “Hey.” I move her hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. “I didn’t know you wanted that?”

Her lips pucker a little, her eyes flying over my shoulder. “I think I do. What about you?” The question I’ve thought about more than she probably realizes. “I mean, I know that’s a real stupid question, of c—”

“It’s not that, baby. It’s just—what if it’s hereditary? What if they come out to be the new Ted Bundy or somethin’ because they won’t have you?” Fear cripples my bones, and panic starts to raise my blood pressure. “Fuck. That could be a disaster.”

She raises her hands and rests them on my cheeks. “Keaton, you’re the greatest man I know. When was the last time you needed to?”

“Not the fact of need,” I say, but I already know what she’s saying. “Two years...”

A smile turns up on her face, and suddenly the sun setting behind her is way too fucking bright. I curl my hand behind the back of her neck, forcing her lips onto mine. “I love you. It’s because I love you that I don’t need to be that person anymore.”

Her smile spreads over my mouth before she bites my bottom lip playfully. “I love you too. Now, may I please have your sperm?”

My chest rumbles when a chuckle leaves me, picking her up from the ground and throwing her over my shoulder as I make our way back up to Sunday Session. “I guess so.” She laughs all the way up and through the forest and I don’t place her back down onto her feet until we reach the long rectangle table that’s stretched over the grass clearing right in the middle of where all the houses surround. Luna-Knox is running around between the tables, and Perse and King are each holding their two new additions. Everyone is seated. The crew, The Brothers, everyone who makes Midnight Mayhem what it is are all seated around the table, digging into the hot food laid out in the middle like fucking royalty.

“Guess what?” Cartier bounces around the table. “Keaton is giving me his sperm.”

Silence.

Lilith starts laughing, Kyrin is groaning, rolling his eyes, and Luna calls out, "Sperm!"

Shaking my head, I find my place beside King and on the other side of Cartier as she wriggles under my arm. This is what Midnight Mayhem was always supposed to be about. About family and a safe unit. A place where we can all rely on each other no matter how much we fight.

Kissime is at the end of the table near Kenan and Rose, and Maya has Val on her lap. Saskia and Killian are arguing about their wedding date, and their little spawn of Satan is already crawling through the grass to chase his cousins.

I've loved Cartier from the second I met her, but I fell in love with her gradually as time went on. Her laughter vibrates over the table as her little head tips back and she pops a bunch of grapes into her mouth. No one has run Midnight Mayhem the way she has. The organizing, the treatment of the crew, the time slots. She was born to do what she's doing, but she was also born to—

I lean back, tapping Kyrin's back.

He looks over his shoulder, leaning closer so he can hear me.

"Gonna ask her to marry me. You good? Or you wanna fight it out again?"

The corner of his lip twitches upward as he tosses his fork onto the table and rolls up his sleeve. "Come on, motherfucker. Let's go."

Cartier

Love isn't just a word. It's an energy that surrounds the people who you not only love, but who love you back. You give to take back.

A hundred-dollar bill slams onto the table in front of me, and I look up to who it is that has dropped it.

Eli grins down at me with his wide-ass smile. "Hundred on Keaton."

I scoff on a laugh. "You're so loyal. Truly."

Another hundred-dollar bill drops. "Me too!" Lilith chuckles into the side of Eli's neck, smiling against him. Since Eli is still a King, he spaces

out his time between here and Riverside. Thankfully, it's only a short drive, but the man can't stay long away from his family anyway.

"Well—" I pause when metallic tasting lips touch mine.

"—you better be dropping another hundred on me, baby, or we're gonna have a problem."

I smirk against his mouth, licking the drop of blood off his chin. "Hundred on Kyrin..." Before Keaton can do anything but narrow his eyes, he's being pulled back by Kyrin and the fight continues.

Chuckling, Eli turns in his chair, looking over my shoulder at them. "This will never change, right?"

"God, I hope not."

We both laugh as he hooks his arm around my shoulder and pulls me in to place a soft kiss on my head.

My life is full of messy people who don't always make the right choices. They screw up as often as I do, fight, fuck, and argue. You see, love isn't supposed to be perfect either. Love is supposed to be whatever the fuck you want it to be.

This is family. It's love. It's hate. It's an unimaginable amount of patience. It's peace with a little havoc, fury with a smidge of mischief, screaming when being silenced, and finally a little chaos when we reign. We perform crazy acts in front of strangers, dress up like little monsters after the clock strikes twelve, but at the end of the night, when the curtains close and the show is over, we're just this.

Midnight Mayhem.



Curtain Call

Dave

Well, friends... the time has come. Walls will be crumbled around my feet like I've always wanted. Needed. Do I? I'm confused. I was met with the love of my life, reunited like a flame to the midnight sky. I thought about this much, if not often. When I first sat in the back row of a Midnight Mayhem show, I knew there was only one way to end this. Stuck in a battlefield of need, want, and what I should do... I didn't know what way to turn. What way was right.

But now I have him back. My Koko. He is mine, and I am his.

He grips me around the backs of my thighs, lowering me down on top of him. "You ready for the final show, baby doll?"

I curl my tongue over the paint on his face. "One last show?" The root of all my anger started with Kiznitch and the people who danced in this show. I hate every single one of them. The way they took everything from me. Perse was supposed to be my sister, yet she saddled up to King like a peasant. Gripped by his flowery love, she lost her way like I always knew she would.

But not us. Not Kohen and me. We've always known. Being outcasted and never good enough, we will finally get our last laugh.

He sucks my lip into his mouth. "Yes... we burn together."

I grin against him, reaching for the flamethrower near my leg. "Forever and ever."

Three Weeks Later

"Fuck. Where are we?"

Triggers:

Violence

Murder

Blood and gore

Miscarriage (side character)

Sexualising Assault

BDSM elements

Blood play

[Back to beginning of book](#)

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