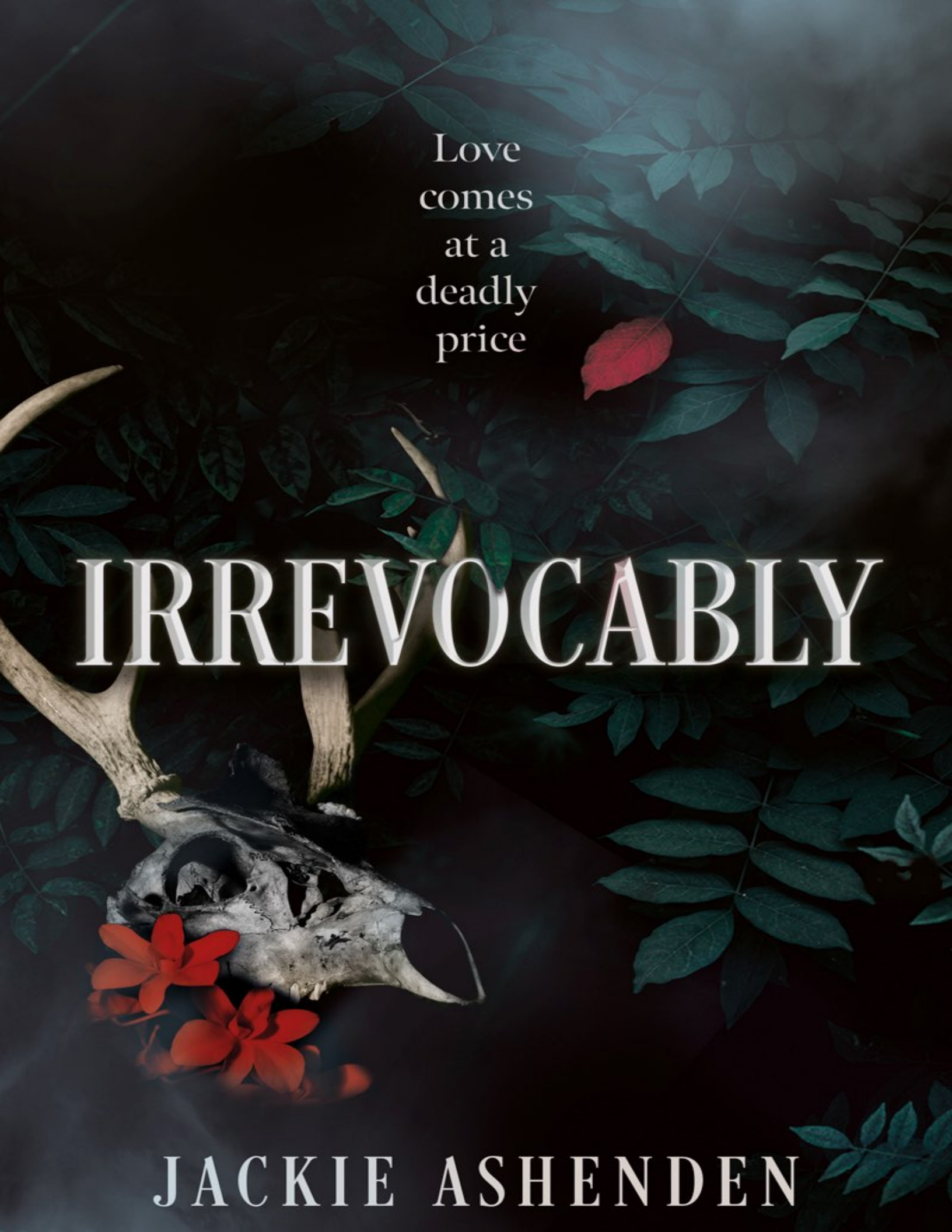


The background of the cover is a dark, moody photograph of dense foliage. In the lower-left corner, there is a detailed image of a deer skull with antlers, partially obscured by several bright red flowers. The text is overlaid on this background.

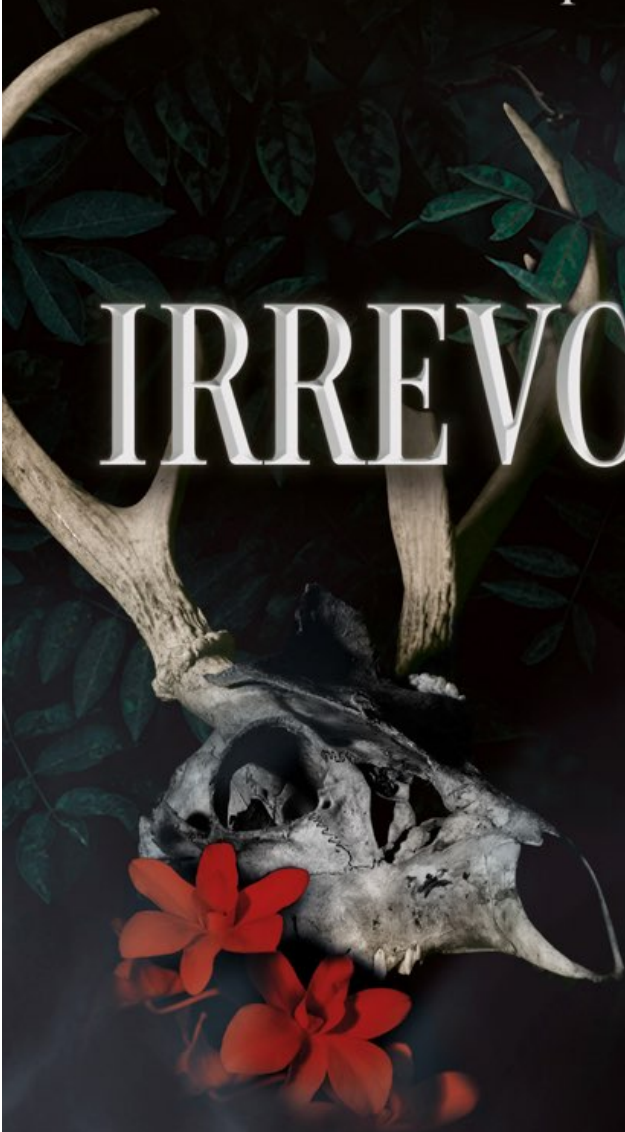
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This book is intended for mature readers (18+) and contains themes and events which may be triggering for some readers. These include, but are not limited to:

- Self-harm
- Stalking
- Non-consensual/coercive sexual dynamics
- Violence
- Kidnapping
- Domestic abuse references
- Pain-related sexual content

For a full list of warnings, please visit the author's website. <https://www.jackieashenden.com/>

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This one's for Maisey, my soul sister. ❤️

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Prologue

Pain is nature's way of letting you know that you're alive, that's what I've always believed. Doesn't really matter what kind of pain – it's all one in the end – but it grounds you. Holds you in the present. Makes you aware of your own existence, and the miracle of it.

Pain concentrates everything, sharpens everything. It's like when you're touching up a photo with a filter, and you turn everything that was blurry and fuzzy into crisp, high definition.

Pain is a forest fire sweeping through you, leaving nothing but silence and softly falling ashes in its wake.

Pain is a teacher, and the lesson isn't to escape it, it's to embrace it.

Pain is the blade of a knife against my skin, and the blood that wells up when I cut.

Pain is absence.

Pain is a killer walking away into the darkness.

Leaving me alone.

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Chapter One

ASTRID

Gripping my phone tightly in my hand, I avoid the crowds of students and duck into the ladies' bathroom. There's no one in it, thank God, but I take the free stall at the end of the row all the same.

I lock the door, flip the lid of the toilet down and sit on it. Then I take a few deep breaths before looking down at my phone again. I must have misread it, surely.

The screen glows in the dimness of the bathroom stall as I glance down to check my biochemistry grade again. No, I didn't misread it. I got a B Plus.

There's a balloon in my chest, slowly inflating, pressing against my ribs, against my lungs, against my heart. Making it so I can't breathe.

B Plus. It's not enough. I have to get an A at the very least.

Tears prick at the backs of my eyes, but I blink them back, furious with myself. Lots of people would be thrilled to get a B Plus, so why the fuck am I crying about it? Then again, most people aren't trying to get into one of the country's most prestigious med schools, where you need an A average to even get an interview.

The balloon keeps inflating, my anxiety building to an unbearable pressure. I need to talk to Professor Bright, ask her if I can redo the assignment. I don't really have the time, what with all the other assignments I have due, but I need to do something.

I was the one who decided to follow in my mom's footsteps and apply for the same med school that she was studying at when she died, and I'm the one putting pressure on myself to get in. Dad doesn't care what I do, but then, he hasn't cared for a long time, so the only one I'm performing for is myself.

Maybe I'm crazy to believe I could do this.

Maybe I'm crazy to believe I could ever be as brilliant as she was.

My backpack is on the floor beside me, and before I can think better of it, I'm reaching for the zip on the front pocket and pulling it open. Taking out the small knife I keep there. It's been freshly sharpened, so I know the cut will be clean and neat.

I try not to do this on campus. It makes me feel like a failure when I do, but I have to get rid of my anxiety somehow since I have a full day of classes and my shelving shift at the library to get through.

Carefully, I pull up the sleeve of my sweatshirt, exposing my wrist. My hand used to shake the first few times I tried cutting, but it doesn't anymore.

I draw the blade across my wrist, the pain sharp and clean and bright, and the balloon in my chest slowly deflates, the pressure easing as a line of blood wells.

No, it's fine. I can do this. I'll see Professor Bright, explain the situation to her, and ask her how I can pull up my average. I'm one of her favourite students, and she likes a hard worker, which I am.

I sit there a moment, letting the pain wash away my fear and my doubt, staring at the blood trailing over my skin. There are a few faint scars there already, pearly lines that tell a story about this bad little habit of mine.

My dad doesn't know I do this. No one knows I do this. It's my secret, and maybe it's fucked up, but cutting is better than drugs or alcohol, and it's certainly cheaper. All you need is one sharp knife.

The pain becomes a dull ache, and I grab some toilet paper from the roll, and press it over the cut. A few seconds later, I take it away, check to make sure the blood has clotted, then pull my sweatshirt sleeve back down again so the cuff covers my wrist. I carefully clean the blade of my knife, tuck it away in my backpack, then check the time on my phone.

Fuck. If I don't hurry, I'm going to be late for English and I really hate being late.

My post-pain calm evaporates as I hurriedly get my crap together, then rush for the bathroom door. But I'm not looking at where I'm going, too busy stressing about being late, and as I step out into the corridor, my shoulder bumps into someone hard. I stumble and my backpack slides off my shoulder, and I must have forgotten to zip it up, because all my stuff spills out of it and onto the floor.

"Shit, shit, shit," I mutter, trying to ignore students streaming down the hallway, all giving my pathetic little pile of items a wide berth. I crouch down and start grabbing things, only to have my fingers almost close around a very large, tattooed hand.

I jerk away in shock, going down on my butt, squinting through the lenses of my glasses at the shape crouched in front of me. The shape resolves itself into a man – tall, with wide shoulders, dressed all in black. He has short, inky hair, winged black brows, cheekbones to die for and a hard, faintly cruel looking mouth. But it's his eyes that pin me to the spot. They're the most intense blue I've ever seen, and I can't stop staring.

He says nothing and doesn't smile. Instead, he picks up the tampon that had been lurking in the depths of my backpack for weeks and holds it out to me, his gaze utterly unreadable.

My chest tightens, my lungs desperate for air, and it's not because of my anxiety this time. This time it's because he's the hard thing I ran into, and he's the most beautiful man I've ever seen, and, oh yes, he's holding my tampon.

I flush, my cheeks burning as I hurriedly get up and snatch the tampon out of his hand. "Sorry," I mutter, pushing my glasses back up my nose. "I didn't see you."

"Clearly." His voice is very deep, and very cold, and there's an edge of darkness to it, like sin wrapped in black velvet.

Discomforted, I tear my gaze from his and grab at the rest of my things, trying to stuff them awkwardly back into my backpack.

I'm the quiet girl. The girl who sits at the back of the class at school, not drawing attention to herself. The girl in the background whom no one notices, and whose name they can't quite remember. The nerdy girl whose idea of a fun time in high school was looking through a microscope and watching cells divide.

I'm not the girl that hot AF guys look at or even see, so I don't know what to say to this one, with his blue eyes and his knife-sharp cheekbones, who I ran into like an idiot. Who picked up my tampon like it was no big deal.

Instead, I concentrate on stuffing most of my stuff away before turning to grab my laptop, only to find him holding it out to me.

I reach to take it and as his fingertips brush against mine, a sharp prickle of electricity casts a net over my skin. I freeze, staring up into his eyes, like a deer staring at the headlights of a car. My God, he's so tall. He has to be like six-four at least, and there's something about him, something dark and dangerous that steals the breath from my throat. If I'm a deer, he's a wolf, and he'll eat me alive if I'm not careful.

"Be careful next time, hmm?" he says, and before I can reply, he rises smoothly to his feet and walks past me as if nothing happened.

I clutch my laptop to my chest, my heart beating fast, and as I straighten, I turn to look after him, only to find that he's disappeared into the milling crowds of students.

I blink and turn back, still clutching my laptop, my fingertips prickling from where they brushed his, my brain in a kind of stasis. As if my thoughts have all vanished and the only thing in them is the image of his face and those impossibly blue eyes. Even the dull ache of my cut is forgotten.

Get it the fuck together. You're already late. Don't make yourself even later.

This is true. I give myself a little shake, get myself the fuck together, head to my next class, which is across the quad, in the Carlisle building.

Blackwater University is a pretty campus, all Gothic architecture – think spires and turrets and buttresses and Oxford – built of dark stone, with ornate windows better suited to a church than a college. But two hundred years ago, when they built it, I guess the architects thought learning was akin to religion.

Everything is clustered around a central quad with green lawns, brick paths, and trees. In the summer, students lie around in the sun on the grass, but now it's late fall, and the weather's crap, and while the oaks look beautiful dressed in red and yellow leaves, no one wants to be lying out on the grass admiring them while freezing to death.

I put my head down and head to the main lecture-hall complex, hoping like hell I'm not as late as I fear I am, but Professor Cleary must have been late himself, since when I get to the lecture hall, he's only just started.

I spend the class paying close attention, typing notes in a fury.

Applications for med school go out this month, then there's study for midterms, and I can't afford not to get As. I have a lot of work to do if I want to turn that B plus into an A, which means I can't afford any distractions.

At the end of the lecture, I pack my stuff away, intending to go straight to the study hall, but as I exit the lecture, I hear someone calling my name.

I stop in the middle of the vaulted hallway, noisy and crowded with students heading out of class, and turn to find my friend Rowan standing behind me.

I don't have many friends. I'm too quiet and reserved for most people, and I'm not into the whole music/boys/fashion thing that other girls are into. It's not that I'm a "not like other girls" girl. It's just that most of the people I knew growing up had families, a mom and dad and brothers and sisters. They went to girl scouts, and had birthday parties, and went on trips to Silver Lake, the largest town close to Blackwater to hang out at the mall.

Their moms never died of cancer when they were little, and their dads were never so deep in grief that the distance between him and his one daughter became so vast it couldn't be bridged. And they never had to worry about whether that dad was eating or check the levels in the liquor cabinet to see if he was drinking, or listen for the TV late at night, hoping not to hear it because that meant he was sleeping.

I'm not totally friendless, though. I have Wolf, whom I've known since I was a kid, and Rowan, whom I met in high school. She's one of those extroverts who randomly befriend an introvert, then make it their mission to drag said introvert everywhere they go. I don't know why Rowan chose me, but she did, and I'm glad, because God knows I don't have any other college friends.

She's heading into tech research, which suits her analytical brain, and her schedule isn't quite as full as mine, so she's got more time to party.

On cue, her hazel eyes fix me with a steady look. "Whatever plans you have tonight, cancel them," she says. "You're coming out with me instead."

This can only mean that somewhere there is a party happening, and Rowan will not rest until I have given a firm commitment to come with her.

It's very difficult to resist Rowan when she's in one of her insistent moods, but I try anyway, since I've got far too many other things to do. "Ro, I'd love to come, but Dad—"

"No," she interrupts, holding up a hand. "I will not be taking any refusals at this time. The only acceptable answer is 'yes, Rowan, I'd love to come' period."

Shit. I need to finish my English assignment tonight, because it's due in a couple of days, as is the one I need to do for chemistry.

The balloon inside me begins to inflate again, an insistent pressure against my lungs that makes my chest constrict, so I focus on the cut on my wrist, using the dull ache to equalise things.

"Ro, I—"

"Please." She gives me puppy dog eyes. "Mike is going to be there, and I need a wing-woman."

Mike is the guy she's currently pursuing, and I'm pretty sure she doesn't actually need a wing-woman, but she's my friend and I don't want to let her down. Besides, she'll nag at me until I say yes, and I'm already too tired of my own internal nagging to put up with hers as well.

It's just one night. I can do the assignment afterwards. Sleep is for the weak.

"Okay," I say, hoping the reluctance doesn't show in my voice. "Yes, Rowan, I'd love to come."

Rowan grins. "Excellent. I'll drive. I'll come by yours at eight."

"Where are we going?"

"A party." She glances down at her watch then curses and starts backing away. "Eight p.m., Astrid."

"What kind of party?" I have to throw the question at her retreating back since it's clear that I'm not the only one who's having issues with punctuality.

“An amazing one,” she tosses over her shoulder before disappearing into one of the lecture halls.

It won’t be amazing. It will be loud and awkward, and I’ll spend most of it thinking about all the other stuff I have to do instead of enjoying myself. But I’ve said I’d go now, and I’m someone who keeps their promises.

I’ve got a shelving shift in the afternoon, and normally I like my shifts. It’s quiet in the library, and doing a good job is easy. All I have to do is put books on shelves in the right place and in the right order, nothing too stressful, but the prospect of the party is making my chest tighten up again.

Come on, you’re in college. Live a little.

I can’t afford to live a little, though. Not yet. I’ll live once I have a degree under my belt and an MD after my name, and Dad notices that while he might have lost his wife, he still has a daughter.

I’m pushing the book cart around the end of one shelf, thinking about how I’m going to handle this party, when the cart stops dead, as if I’ve pushed it up against a brick wall.

I jerk my attention from my ruminations, focusing ahead of me and see that to my horror, I’ve pushed the cart not against a wall, but a person.

Shit.

“Oh, my God,” I say. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t—”

“Again?” The voice is deep, dark and very male. Familiar, too. “That’s the second time today.”

My horror deepens as I process just who I’ve run my cart into.

Blue eyes. Inky hair. Dressed in black. Beautiful...

My breath catches. He has his hands on the other end of the cart, his long fingers curled around the edge, showing off the tattoos inked into his skin. Arcane symbols on each finger while roses and skulls climb the back of each hand.

It’s the guy that I ran into earlier. The guy who picked up my damn tampon and handed it to me.

My face gets hot and I try to think of a witty comeback – any comeback, really – but all the thoughts have vanished from my brain, crushed beneath the pressure of his cold stare.

He lifts one black brow, apparently waiting for me to speak, but my voice isn't working. In the corridor I sensed something dark about him, and I sense the same thing now, a violent aura that scares me on some fundamental level.

This man isn't the hero of the story. He's the villain.

I try to get some moisture into my dry mouth. "I-I'm sorry," I force out. "I didn't see you."

"Perhaps you need your glasses checked," he says.

Automatically, I push my glasses up my nose, my cheeks burning for the second time that day, and before I can stop myself, I say tartly, "Or perhaps you shouldn't be in my way."

His gaze flickers and abruptly narrows, and I find myself being studied as if he's taking note and cataloguing every part of me with that focused stare.

I've never been looked at so intently or with so much purpose, and it's unnerving. It makes me feel exposed, as if he's seeing into my head and going through all my thoughts, dispassionate as he reads every one, and suddenly I'm desperate to get away.

I open my mouth to tell him to move, but before I can speak, he releases the end of the cart, reaches into the pocket of his black jeans and pulls out a phone. *My phone.*

Shock moves in a cold wave through me, making me forget my discomfort. I must have been more distracted than I thought if I didn't even realise it was missing.

"Where the hell did you get that?" I demand.

"You dropped it when you ran into me. I've been trying to find you to give it back." He holds it out to me, not moving, and I have the weird

thought that he's holding it like bait, using it to lure me into a trap. Which is stupid. My anxiety must be working overtime today.

Forcing the shock and the weird sense of vulnerability away, I grab my phone from him like I grabbed my tampon earlier, and this time I make sure that our fingers don't touch.

"Thank you," I say, pocketing it. "How did you know where to find me?"

"I asked around."

I should feel better knowing that the reason he's here is to return my phone, but I don't feel better, not with the way he's looking at me.

"Could you move, please?" I say, suddenly desperate to get away from him. "I've got books to shelve."

He stares at me a second longer, then steps to one side, making an "after you" gesture. But he doesn't walk away, which means I'll have to squeeze me and my cart past him, and that's not ideal since he's very close and I really don't like that.

Still, I don't have a choice, so I determinedly push the cart on. As I go past him, I catch his scent, dark and spicy and masculine, and an unexpected shiver goes through me. I don't know what that means, so I ignore it, but the back of my neck is prickling, and even though I should stop and shelve these damn books, I don't want to.

"You missed it," he says from behind me. "The three hundreds are here."

I stop and shut my eyes, cursing myself silently. I have no idea why he's still standing there watching me, or why he's even talking to me, but I don't like it. Every threat sense I have is shrilling a warning, telling me to keep going, to put some distance between him and me, but I have a job to do. And I'm not going to let some guy stop me from doing it, no matter how scary he is.

“Oh, right,” I say, pretending I’d merely forgotten all about the three hundreds. “So, they are.”

I straighten, steel myself, and turn to face him, but he’s gone.

As if he was never there.

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Chapter Two

LUCIEN

I have my car parked a few yards down from a two-storey white house, with a porch and a gabled roof. The fence is literal white pickets and the lawn is overgrown. A family home, though there are only two people in this family. A father and daughter.

The night has long since crept in, and the leafy street is silent, the children who were playing in it a few hours ago, now safe in their beds.

Blackwater is quiet for a campus town. It's got that sleepy, quaint quality that some towns have, as if nothing bad ever happens here. As if there are no monsters, human or otherwise, roaming its streets.

But I know something the parents of those sleeping children don't know. Blackwater is also a harbour town, and Blackwater port is the nexus of a very lucrative arms business, currently under the control of the local biker gang, the Hellhounds.

That business is why me and my family, the Frosts, are here, and it's why I'm currently parked outside the house of Blackwater's Chief of Police, Elias Starling.

The Hellhounds operate with no interference from the law, and we suspect that's because the Hellhounds' club president and the police chief

have an understanding, and we need to know what that understanding is, because we'll need it to continue when we take over.

We also need to know more about the club before we can make our move. So my sister, Thea, has someone trying to get an in with them so we can start gathering intel.

Me, I'm handling the chief, surveilling his office and home to see what I can get on him and his relationship with the club.

I glance down at the laptop sitting on the passenger seat next to me, where the camera feeds are showing me the kitchen and dining area, the living room, the stairs, first floor hallway and bedrooms.

First thing I did when I was given this mission was to put eyes in the chief's house. It wasn't difficult. I can see him now, sitting in his favourite armchair in front of the TV, beer in hand. He's watching football and his team is losing, which explains his look of disgust.

I've already searched the house, and last night, I searched his office at the station to see what information I could turn up – again, it was easy enough to evade their security – but I found nothing. I put up some cameras in the station, just in case.

So far, my week of surveillance has revealed nothing relevant, but it hasn't been a total loss. I now have another person of interest.

His daughter, Astrid Starling.

She's nothing special on the surface, just a normal college student, but she's close friends with one of the MC's enforcers, and that caught my attention.

I'd feel sorry for her if I was a normal man, because catching my attention is a very bad thing. But I'm not a normal man. I was trained from a young age to be an assassin, a killer, a weapon, and a weapon has no mercy. A weapon has no empathy, no feelings. It's merely a tool to be wielded – and that's exactly what I am, a blade in the back. A bullet to the heart.

My phone vibrates, lighting up the screen with a text notification. It's from Astrid's friend, Rowan, reminding her that she'll be there at eight. Good. The spyware I put on her phone when I ran into her on the BU campus today is working.

The chief is my target, not his daughter, but I think I'll shift my attention to her, on the off-chance she has an interaction with her enforcer friend that could get me results. I'm nothing if not thorough. In my line of work, if you're not thorough, you're dead.

I glance at the feed from Astrid's bedroom, which shows her coming in wrapped in a towel, having just had a shower. She's getting ready for the party Rowan invited her to, at Blackwater Beach, near the port area.

Interesting that she's going to the party since my research into the Starlings has indicated she's not much of a partygoer. She's not much of anything, or at least, not much of anything interesting.

She's a straight-A student, who volunteers at a local shelter, has a part-time job shelving books at the campus library, and seems to spend most of her time studying and looking after her father. A normal, good little girl, living a normal, safe little life.

I watch her now as she goes to her dresser and pulls out some clothing, innocently getting ready for a party. She drops her towel in preparation for dressing, her naked body pale in the stark light of the bedroom. She's pretty, but I've seen plenty of tits and ass before. They don't move me.

Nothing moves me, not anymore. Nothing except my present mission goal, and my mission goal is to find out what the relationship is between the chief and the MC.

Astrid puts on her underwear – pretty cotton panties with little flowers on them and a lacy white bra. Then an oversized white shirt with a band logo on it, and jeans. She adds the necklace she wears all the time, a little star, then shakes her long silvery curls out, and they bounce around her shoulders like cotton candy.

She's a fairy. She's fucking Tinkerbell, but I don't believe in fairies.

I believe in my Glock and the bullet that comes out of it, and the blood that usually follows. Those things are solid and real and trustworthy. They don't lie, not like people do.

My other phone vibrates, the cheap burner in my pocket, and I pull it out. There's only one number in it, because I only use it to send messages to one person.

Progress?

He's always terse and to the point, so I reply in kind.

Proceeding as planned.

Good. I want this done.

I don't bother replying. He trusts me to do my job.

Astrid leans in toward the mirror on her dresser and scowls at her reflection. Then she picks up a tube of mascara and starts applying it, and I notice the red line on her wrist. It looks like she cut herself on a piece of glass or something, but the placement is odd.

I watch her, turning an idea over in my mind. Lazarus has been very clear that we're not to draw notice from anyone, and most especially not the law, which is why I haven't gone straight to the chief and forced the information from him at gunpoint. But that doesn't mean I can't attempt getting it out of his daughter instead.

Astrid wrinkles her nose at her reflection, as if she's dissatisfied with what she sees, but I don't know why she would be. Her features are precise, with a sharp nose, pointed chin and a rosebud of a mouth. Not exactly beautiful, but not far off, either.

This party that she's going to tonight could be useful to me. The beach will be crowded with college students, and dark, and I could pull her aside, ask her some questions. No one would notice.

A car pulls up out the front of the Starlings' house. On the camera feed, I see Astrid pick up her phone and look down at the screen. My own screen lights up again with a text from her friend Rowan, who's just arrived to get her.

She grabs a hoodie and leaves her bedroom, and I follow her progress down the hall then down the stairs. She pauses by the entrance to the living room and calls a goodbye to her father. I switch views from the laptop to the house, and the front door opens. Astrid comes hurrying out, pale curls streaming.

She's a delicate little thing, and the problem with delicate little things is that they get broken very easily. I'm a careful man, though, and I'll make sure she doesn't break.

Not until I want her to.

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Chapter Three

ASTRID

The party is on Blackwater Beach, at the north end of town, where the lights of the port shine, and by the time we get there, I can hear the thump of the bass blaring from someone's speakers. It settles in my chest like a heartbeat.

It's cold as we get out of the car, a wind whipping in from the sea, smelling of salt and wet sand, and rain. It makes me shiver. It's not actually raining for a change, but it's not party weather, either, and most especially not when that party is on a beach.

Still, when I see a few Harleys lined up in the parking lot, my heart lifts. Not the usual response to seeing bikers, I know, but one of those bikes is Wolf's, my best friend since kindergarten, so at least there'll be one person I know already there. He's a member of Hellhounds MC, which is problematic since the chief of police here in Blackwater is my dad. I don't much like the club, but Wolf is important to me, so we kind of have a "don't ask, don't tell" agreement.

As Rowan and I make our way down to the beach, I see flames dancing on the sand. Someone has built a bonfire and dragged logs of driftwood around it, and there's quite a crowd gathered already. They're sitting on logs

or standing around talking and laughing. No one seems to mind the cold wind, even the girls in strappy dresses and micro minis.

Rowan has brought beer and hands me a can as we get closer to the fire, then points silently to Mike, who is sitting with his friends on one of the logs.

I jam my hands in the pockets of my hoodie and follow Rowan over to the bonfire. She's somehow managed to find some space on the end of the log next to Mike, and now she's talking to him as if they're old friends. I stand awkwardly beside the log, since there's no room on it for me, sipping at my beer. I don't like it, but I need something to do with my hands, so I clutch the can in a death grip, scanning the people around the bonfire, looking for Wolf.

I spot him eventually, standing with some other club members, a bit away from the flames. The firelight plays over his tall figure, making the gold strands in his short dark brown hair gleam, and highlighting his strong jaw and straight nose. He's smiling down at a girl who's batting her eyelashes at him, and of course she is. Wolf's hot, especially in jeans, a black Henley and his leather vest – a cut they call it – which has an image of a snarling dog and the words “Hellhounds MC” on the back.

Since Rowan is busy chatting, I walk across the sand toward Wolf. He sees me coming and instantly his handsome face lights up. The woman he's been talking to gives me an annoyed look, but I'm no threat to her. Wolf is a friend, my best friend, nothing more.

“Hey,” I say, grinning.

“Addie,” he says back, also grinning. “Since when you do come to beach parties?”

“Since Rowan begged me.” I wave my beer can in Rowan's direction. “A guy was involved.”

“A guy is always involved.” Wolf envelops me in one of his bear hugs. He's built like a tank, and smells of leather and engine oil, and his

familiarity makes me instantly feel a thousand times better. I haven't seen him for ages, because what with study and work, I haven't had the time, but being with him now makes me realise that I've missed him.

"Good to see you." He releases me and stands back, his dark eyes assessing. "It's been a bit."

"I know," I say, feeling guilty. "I'm sorry. Midterms are killing me."

"Yeah, and stop it with the guilt already," Wolf says, reading me like a book. "I know you're busy."

One of the things I love about Wolf, is that I don't ever have to explain myself to him. He knows me. He knows that I feel guilty when I don't see him, and I know that when he tells me to stop feeling that way, he means it.

"You also know that I'm going to feel guilty about it whether you tell me to or not," I say.

"True." He grins. "So, how's the study going? You a doctor yet?"

I roll my eyes. He always asks me if I'm a doctor yet. I want to tell him about the B plus and how I'm worried about my grade average, and how I feel like I'm failing, but I can't. Wolf's confidence in me and my academic ability is helping me keep going at the moment, and I don't want to undermine that by telling him all about my stupid anxieties. So, I tell him how much I hate chemistry instead.

Wolf's always been a good listener. We used to tell each other everything, at least until that last year of middle school, when his mother finally left his abusive father. She went without taking Wolf, though, leaving him to deal with his father on his own, and he changed after that. He stopped telling me his secrets and started ditching school, fell in with a bad crowd. It wasn't until high school, when we were in biology together, that we got back to being friends. He was failing the class, so I helped him, and we just went on from there.

When I told him I wanted to go to the same med school as my mom, he was nothing but supportive and encouraging. Unlike my dad, who frowned

and warned me that it was a lot of work, and did I really want to pursue that?

I think I'm doing a good job of pretending I'm okay, and that the balloon against my ribs isn't inflating with every minute I stand here talking to him instead of in my bedroom studying. But when he frowns and asks, "Are you really okay?" I know that my good job is actually pretty shit.

I'm about to tell him that I'm fine, when mercifully one of Wolf's club friends ambles over and says something in his ear. He mutters a curse and turns back to me. "Sorry, Addie, but I've gotta go. Club business."

I keep my long-suffering sigh inside – there always "club business" at some point with Wolf – and wave as he and his friends leave. Then I wander away from the crowds and the bonfire, going toward the sea, the dark waves rolling and crashing onto the sand.

The flames of the bonfire cast long, leaping shadows and the air is full of salt and the crisp bite of the oncoming winter.

I stare out over the water, realising it's not only Wolf I miss, but being on the beach, too. When I was a kid and Dad was more of a dad to me than he is now, he used to bring me here a lot, and we'd search for shells and sea glass, and driftwood polished by the ocean. He stopped taking me when I got older and used the TV to babysit me instead.

I'm still thinking about that when a familiar prickling sensation creeps over the back of my neck. Shit, am I being watched again? I turn sharply to find a man standing about a foot behind me, towering over me. Shock washes like a wave over and I give a soundless gasp, stumbling back.

It's the guy who ran into me earlier today and who stared at me in the library. Black hair. Blue eyes. Tattoos...

Run away. Run fast. Run far.

For a second I debate doing just that, but as the shock of his sudden appearance begins to dissipate, I come to my senses and shove my insane flight instinct away. Okay, so sure, he's got kind of a scary aura, but I'm on

a beach full of people. It's not as if I'm alone. Anyway, I'm not a coward and I'm not going to let a guy covered in tattoos intimidate me, no matter how tall or hot he is.

"Not you again." I lift my chin and meet his cold gaze head-on. "Are you following me?"

"What would you say if I was?" His voice is as cold as the ocean behind me.

"I'd say you're a fucking creep and leave me alone."

He takes a step closer to me, then stops, which is good because there's nothing but sea at my back. He's in the same black jeans and hoodie he was in earlier today, and his only concession to the shitty weather is a worn black leather jacket over the top.

"Relax," he says. "I only want to ask you a couple of questions."

I wrap my jacket more firmly around me as the wind catches my hair, tossing it around my head. I can't think of what he'd want to ask me, not when I don't know him from a bar of soap. "Why?" I ask suspiciously. "What questions?"

He ignores me. "What do you know about the Hellhounds?"

The Hellhounds? Why does he want to know about them? And why the hell is he asking me? I blink, caught off-guard. Then I narrow my gaze, scanning him. He's not an MC member, that's for sure, because if he was, he'd be wearing his cut, and again, why is he asking me?

"Nothing," I say shortly. "Who are you?"

"You can call me Lucien. And I don't think you know nothing." One black brow rises. "You're friends with one of them, aren't you?"

Something cold whispers through me, and it's not the wind. How does he know that I'm friends with Wolf?

"No," I lie. "I've got nothing to do with them."

"If that's the case, then why were you talking to one of their enforcers just before?" He strolls toward me, taking his time, oddly graceful and not a

little predatory. “I saw you, you know. He gave you a hug.”

I’m backing away before I can stop myself, my sneakers sinking in the soft, damp sand as I try to put some distance between us. I’m even colder now, and my brain is screaming louder. This guy is a threat, because if he’s been watching me from the darkness, whatever he wants it can’t be good.

Today has been awful and I’m tired. I don’t want to be here, and the last thing I need is some creep startling me then getting up in my grille about my best friend’s club. So, I stop backing away and hold my ground, but now his huge, muscled form is towering over me, that dark aura of his engulfing me. The threat of violence glitters in his cold eyes, and I know on some basic level that if I don’t give him what he wants, he’ll hurt me.

Let him, some part of me thinks. I’m not afraid of pain. Pain has always made things better anyway.

“He’s some guy I went to high school with,” I say, digging my heels into the sand. “I haven’t seen him in ages, and we were just catching up.”

The man’s eyes narrow into thin slits of sapphire as he stares down at me, the sharpness of his gaze stripping away my skin, my flesh, all the way down to my skull and into the grey matter of my brain.

“Don’t lie to me,” he murmurs, clear and cold as a glacier. “I know where you live, Astrid Starling.”

Shock freezes my blood. He knows where I live? What? And how does he know my name? Maybe he found that out when he came to return my phone, but surely no one would have given him my address. He’s bluffing to intimidate me, that’s what he’s doing.

“No, you don’t,” I say flatly.

“Oh, really? Your garden is overgrown and the white fence pickets could use a repaint.”

The fear coils deeper in me and he must be able to see it on my face, because one corner of his hard mouth curves slightly, as if he’s scored a point.

It makes me angry. I was always smaller than everyone at school, and because I was quiet and shy, and I loved reading, I used to get bullied. At least until Wolf became my friend, and then everyone left me alone.

But Wolf isn't here now. He's gone somewhere with his friends, and even if he was here, with that music going, he wouldn't hear me scream. No one will.

There's just me and this man who's trying to intimidate me into answering his dumb questions. But I'm not seven anymore. I'm the chief of police's daughter, goddammit.

"Are you offering to paint it?" I say tartly, stuffing my fear way down deep inside me. "I'll let Dad know."

The cold glitter in his eyes intensifies and he lifts a hand so fast I'm barely aware of it happening, long fingers wrapping around my neck.

I freeze, every muscle in my body tightening, my heart slamming into my ribcage. His hand is heavy, his skin hot against mine. He's not choking me, though. This is a threat, a show of force.

He leans in, his mouth near my ear. "Playing with me is a very bad idea, Tinkerbell. Especially when I could break that pretty neck and toss your body into the sea."

I barely register being called Tinkerbell, because there's intent in his voice, as sharp and clear as the blade of my knife. I wouldn't be able to stop him if that's what he decided to do, not when I'm no match for his height and his strength.

I should be terrified and a part of me is, but my brain is also doing weird things. It's concentrating on the warmth of his breath on my skin, and the scent of his body so close to mine. The feel of his fingers around my throat. He smells like woodsmoke and dark forests, and rain.

My heart beats faster, loud in my ears.

"You could," I say hoarsely, staring straight ahead at the powerful wall of his chest. "But if you know where I live, then you'll know that my dad is

the police chief and he'd throw your ass in jail so fast it would make your head spin."

Lucien, whoever he is, pauses, as if considering this. "He'd have to find me first."

"That's easy," I say, adrenaline pouring through me. "All he'd have to do is look for the creep hanging around the campus and stealing people's phones."

Very slowly, he lifts his head again and looks down at me, his gaze assessing. "The thought of death doesn't bother you?"

"Sure," I say. "But killing me won't help you get answers about the Hellhounds." I don't know where I'm finding the courage to give him lip, because it's not as if I'm *not* afraid. But I've been living with fear for a long time, so I'm used to it. Also, my fear of him isn't as great as my fear of flunking out of college.

His fingers tighten, a gentle pressure that builds, making me aware of the strength in his long, tattooed fingers. My heartbeat races, my breathing getting faster and faster. He watches me with a kind of clinical detachment, as if throttling me is an experiment he's conducting. There's no emotion in his eyes, no mercy. The stare of a psychopath.

His fingertips press against my windpipe, and I can't breathe. Blackness is closing in around the edges of my vision like ink spilled in water, and I must have gone insane or something, because in this moment it's not fear I feel, but relief. I won't have to try anymore. I won't have to push myself anymore. I can give up and fall into the soft darkness, and just never wake up. I mean, I wasn't meant to be born anyway, right?

Dimly, I hear someone calling my name and the pressure around my throat abruptly releases, leaving me gasping for air. He doesn't remove his hand, though, only the pressure, and his gaze is dispassionate as he looks down at me. "Perfect timing," he says as I suck air into my starved lungs. "Looks like I'll be escaping jail after all." For a second I think he's going to

let me go, but then at the last minute, he bends again and whispers in my ear. "I'll find you again, Astrid Starling."

"Addie!" It's Wolf's voice, getting closer.

Lucien drops his hand from my throat and steps back, looking at me with that strange half-smile curving his mouth. Then he turns and melts into the darkness like a shadow.

Wolf scowls in the direction Lucien disappeared off into. "Who the fuck was that?"

My heart is still pounding and I'm breathing like I've just run the entire length of the country, and I should tell Wolf what that Lucien guy just did to me. But I feel strange. That weird relief still pouring through me, and all I can think about is how warm his hand felt against my throat. How I liked the heaviness of his palm and how, when he put that pressure on my windpipe, I wanted to fold into him. To surrender and sleep.

A wave of shame breaks through my relief, because seriously? I actually thought dying at the hands of a stranger would be a great escape from my life? That's a coward's way out, especially when there are people in this world who have way worse problems than mine.

Wolf, for example. He had a shitty childhood with an abusive father, and he's still standing. He's still living his life. So no, I can't explain Lucien and his hand around my throat to him, and my strange reaction to it.

"No one," I say. "Just a guy trying to find his way back to town."

Wolf glances at me, his scowl turning concerned. "Hey, has something happened?"

"No," I say, breathing deeply. "A slight coughing fit. Weren't you going to do club business or something?"

"Yeah, it was false alarm, so we stayed." He's holding an unopened can of beer and hands it to me. "You look like you could do with one of these."

"Thanks." I take the can and pop the tab.

He's still scowling. "You sure you're okay?"

No. I'm not okay. A random psychopath tried to choke me and I liked it. I wanted it.

"Yes," I say and take sip of the beer, forcing a smile. "I'm fine."

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Chapter Four

LUCIEN

I'm in the shadows, by the rocks on the beach, watching Astrid Starling make her way back to the bonfire with the Hellhound beside her.

I was expecting her to tell him about me immediately, but it's clear that she didn't since he's now standing there, laughing as he downs another beer instead of hunting me down in the dark. And he would, if he knew.

Years ago, Enzo gave me a book on psychology. He told me a good killer gets into the minds of his victims, and to do that you had to understand how people think.

I did my research into the Hound's background, which is usual for a biker. Broken home, abusive father, that kind of thing. His only friend growing up was Astrid Starling – they were misfits together – and following the typical biker psychology, he probably views her as his. So yes, he'd hunt me if he knew I'd hurt her. At least, he could try. I'm very good at not being found when I don't want to be.

The Hound bends and whispers something in her ear as they approach the bonfire, and a small smile turns her mouth. You'd never know that she'd been on the edge of death only a couple of moments earlier.

She hides things, this girl. She didn't tell him that a strange man had had his hand around her throat, choking the life out of her, and that's interesting. Why didn't she tell him? Why is she hiding it? Surely, that's the first thing a good girl like her would have said to him after I disappeared, but clearly not.

Interesting. Perhaps she has hidden depths.

I lean against the rocks, the wind trying to work its way under my jacket, but I ignore it the way I ignore most physical discomforts. Much of hunting involves staying still and waiting, and Enzo trained the impatience out of me years ago. I still have the scars to prove it.

I should be leaving the beach, and considering my next move, but I continue to stand there, watching Tinkerbell by the fire.

It was a risky move to threaten her like that, especially on a crowded beach, and most especially not knowing if she'd tell anyone about me. Lazarus was very clear that we had to lay low and not draw attention, and I'm supposed to be following his orders for now.

But I was curious. I thought she'd be an easy mark, that she'd be intimidated enough to answer my questions straight away, but she held out on me. And not because she wasn't afraid. She was absolutely afraid, I could see the fear glitter in her eyes, yet she refused to answer all the same.

So, I put my fingers around her neck and added pressure to see what she'd do. Most women in that situation would have been screaming their heads off, but she didn't. In fact, the more pressure I applied, the calmer she seemed. Even her fear died away. As I cut off her airway, she stared straight up at me, her eyes so big and dark in the night, staring at me as if I was delivering her a benediction. As if I was her own personal angel of death, and all she wanted to do was surrender to me.

Surrender is not a response I get often. Mostly people wail and fall on their knees, begging for mercy, calling for their mothers. But she wasn't

afraid to die. No, if anything it was resignation I saw on her face, or maybe even relief.

Such emotions are alien to me these days, but I can't deny a certain ... curiosity.

Would I have done it? Would I have squeezed her lovely throat until she suffocated? Broken that delicate neck with a quick twist of my hands? I could have easily enough, without her making a sound. Then I would have dumped her in the water and let that strong current that moves through the harbour take her out into the deep sea. It wouldn't be anything I haven't done before. A target is a target, regardless of gender. Kids might be different, but no one's ever ordered me to kill a kid before, so I haven't had to deal with that particular ethical dilemma yet. Then again, I haven't found a line I couldn't cross so far. I'm a missile and I go where I'm pointed.

Astrid's holding a can of beer, and she tips her head back, taking a swig. Her pale curls dance around her head, the firelight turning them pink and orange, the wind taking her laughter and throwing it in my direction. It sounds like bells.

I can't remember how long it's been since I heard a woman laugh.

There's Thea, my younger sister, of course, but she doesn't laugh much, or at least, not since I found her, Lazarus and Killian, my youngest brother. It took me a couple of months to hunt them out – Lazarus managed to hide their tracks well – but now I'm back in the family fold.

At the bonfire, Astrid glances out into the darkness, scanning the beach. She's looking for me, I can tell. Am I out there right now? Am I watching her? I told her I'd see her around, and perhaps that frightened her. I'm a predator and she doesn't know where or when I'll strike.

The warmth of her skin against mine lingers and I can still feel the silver of her star necklace and the fast beat of her pulse against my palm. Life continuing whether she wanted it to or not. But what makes a girl like her want to die?

I shouldn't be thinking about this now. There's information I need, about what's keeping the police from busting the Hounds' operation wide open, and how we can use that to our advantage. I haven't found any record of any alliance anywhere on paper, not at the chief's house and not at the station. Then again, I'm not surprised that I haven't found anything. It's hardly something the chief would write down anywhere. It's likely to be a gentleman's agreement, as these things usually are, in which case the only people who'd know about it are the chief and the MC's president.

And perhaps Astrid Starling.

It would be easier and quicker to force the information from the chief, but doing so would alert him to our presence here, and if he has an understanding with the MC, then that might involve them as well, and we're not ready to take them on yet. Lazarus has been going back and forth from the city, finding potential allies for us. We'll need some firepower in order to make a move, and we don't have that just yet.

So, for now, it will have to be the indirect approach.

The Hound slings his arm around Astrid's narrow shoulders and leans down to say something to her. But she's not paying attention to him. She's looking beyond the firelight, into the darkness, over to the rocks where I'm standing. She can't see me, nevertheless, she's looking straight at me.

I smile.

She'll be seeing me around sooner than she thinks.

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Chapter Five

ASTRID

I come out of Professor Bright's office, the balloon in my chest already at max inflation. It feels as if it's jostling all my organs and pushing against my heart, shoving it into my ribs.

I was lucky to get an appointment with her so quickly, merely a couple of days after getting that grade, and I should be thankful that she's allowing me to redo the assignment. But all I feel is a terrible, crushing anxiety. She's only giving me a week to do it, and with all my other coursework bearing down on me, I don't know how I'm going to get everything done.

I'm supposed to be smart, like my mother, but clearly, I'm not as smart as she was if I have to redo an entire assignment.

It's the end of the day, and the corridor outside Professor Bright's office is empty of students. Most people have gone home. I don't have a library shift today, which means I should go straight to the study hall and start doing this damn assignment again. But there's a bathroom nearby. And I'm walking toward it before I can think, the pressure inside me a constant ache that only one thing will get rid of.

The bathroom is mercifully as empty as the corridor, so I take the first stall and bang the door shut then lock it. I put down the toilet lid and sit,

reaching for my little knife in the pocket of my backpack.

The cut I made two days ago is still healing, so I extend my other arm. There are lots of little white lines across my wrist there, too. The scars of past cuts, but they're very faint. Faint enough that no one ever notices them.

I used to cut a lot in high school, after Wolf dropped out, joined the MC and ghosted me, but I made myself stop once I graduated. I was able to get through the first year of college okay, but this year the pressure has upped, and I feel it like a weight on my back.

The pressure is all coming from me and I know that. I'm a perfectionist and a people pleaser, which isn't a great combination. Dad wouldn't care if I failed, even though he's paying for my tuition, but that's kind of my problem. I want him to care. I need him to care. Yet whenever I talk to him about my workload or how I'm struggling, he doesn't seem to know what to say except, "Your mother would know what to do." Then he gets upset and I hate that, so I just don't talk to him anymore.

Really, I wonder if Dad's difficulties with me are due to me looking like Mom, so every time he looks at me, he sees his wife and the decision she made that killed her.

I push up my sleeve, lay my arm on my thigh, and place the blade carefully against my skin. Then I cut, clean and smooth, and the pain flows through me, washing everything away, grounding me in the here and now.

It's fucked up that I need this, but if it gets me through the rest of this year, does it really matter? Scars heal and your body makes more blood.

The balloon in my chest is deflating, but not quickly enough, so I make another cut just below the first, shuddering as another white-hot burst of pain floods through me.

I sit for a moment with my eyes closed, letting myself float in the small agony of the cut, and all the anxiety in that fucking balloon, in my entire body, dissipates.

No, I can do this. I can do this assignment, and I'll get an A for it at the very least. I'll get my other assignments done, too, and I'll rock my midterms, and everything will be fine. Everything will be absolutely fine.

Finally, I clean myself up and, still holding my knife, I let myself out of the stall. There's no one in here, so I can rinse the blade without anyone looking at me weirdly.

I go to the sink, my pale face looming in the mirror above. I have a blue scarf wrapped around my neck, though the cold isn't the only reason I'm wearing it. The wool has slipped, revealing one of the dark bruises that stain my skin.

I stare at it, unable to look away.

The morning after the party on the beach, I woke up to find a ring of black bruises around my neck. The marks of Lucien's fingers from when he almost choked me. I studied them for what seemed like hours, remembering the peace that flowed through me as the pressure increased and the oddly gentle way he increased it. Then the wave of hot shame that engulfed me afterwards.

I managed to hide what had happened from Wolf, God knows how, but I did. I stood beside the bonfire laughing like nothing was wrong, while my throat throbbed and the back of my neck prickled. That's how I knew Lucien hadn't gone, that he was watching me from somewhere in the darkness.

Who is he and what does he really want? Something to do with the Hellhounds, obviously, and he targeted me because I'm Wolf's friend. Probably because he thought I'd be easy to get information out of.

"Playing with me is a very bad idea, Tinkerbelle. Especially when I could break that pretty neck and toss your body into the sea."

He would have done it, too, if Wolf hadn't arrived.

I touch the bruise on my neck gently, the silver chain of Mom's star necklace bright against it, remembering the press of his fingers. So strong,

yet warm, too. A complete contrast to his cold blue eyes and the clinical look in them, as if he was only mildly interested in how I would die.

He said he would see me “around” and if I knew what was good for me, I should have told Dad the second I got home. But he was watching TV, and all I could think about was that peaceful feeling, that surrender to the darkness, and what would happen to Dad if I died. Who would look after him? Who would cook when he needed it, and who would do laundry? Would losing me break him completely? Or would he not care?

I couldn’t face that conversation, so I turned around and went straight upstairs to bed.

Coward.

I tear my gaze from the mirror, turn the tap on, then rub my aching chest. Yeah, a coward is exactly what I am. I’m more terrified of admitting to Dad that I can’t deal with my own goddamn life than I am of a stranger’s hands around my throat. That the thought of dying at those same hands feels like a lucky escape, not the nightmare it should be.

Mom died so I could have a life, which means I have to make the most of that life. I can’t fail. Nothing less than total success will do.

I run the blade under the water, rinsing off the blood, then carefully wipe it with a paper towel. I glance in the mirror once more to check that the scarf is hiding my bruises, because I’m not explaining those, not to anyone, and meet a pair of cold eyes staring back.

Shock sweeps through me like an avalanche, and for a second all I can do is stand there, frozen in place, staring at the man reflected in the mirror.

No, he can’t be here. I didn’t hear him come in. I must be seeing things.

I turn around, but I’m not seeing things. He’s right there, standing behind me, tall, dark and infinitely dangerous. The pure lines of his face are carved from granite, the merciless blue of his eyes boring into me.

My heart beats like a drum in my head, so loud it’s a wonder he can’t hear it as well. I’m alone in the bathroom, and no one’s around. If he

decided to kill me now, he could. Security wouldn't hear my screams until it was too late.

He glances down at the knife still clutched in my hand and back up at me again. "You think a fruit knife will protect you?"

My fingertips are cold and I'm terrified, yet the defiance that gripped me on the beach that night is gripping me now. Finally, someone I don't give a fuck about and that I don't have to please. It's liberating in a way.

"The orange I cut up with it this morning would say yes," I snap. "What the hell are you doing here? Come back to finish the job?"

"Perhaps." His gaze scans me like I'm a barcode. "I told you I'd find you."

"Well." I spread my hands, trying to ignore the thump of my heart. "Here I am."

He glances down again and I realise with a sudden shock that a line of blood has trickled down my wrist, and is currently staining my sweatshirt cuff as it drips onto the floor.

Automatically, I pull the cuff down, to hide the blood, but in one of those lightning-fast moves, he grabs my wrist and shoves my sleeve up, exposing the cuts on my arms.

All the breath leaves my lungs, and I try to jerk my hand from his grip as a wash of shame fills me. I don't want anyone to know about the cutting and most especially not the complete stranger who tried to kill me on the beach. But his hold is too strong and I can't get free.

"Let me go," I say, my voice hoarse and breathless.

He ignores me, studying the cuts on my arm then glancing at me again. "You did this?"

His gaze is relentless, but again, I'm tired and stressed out, and I've got shit to do. I haven't got time to be threatened by random men. "No," I say sarcastically, trying to pull away again. "I cut myself shaving, obviously."

Lucien's fingers tighten, his grip unbreakable. He doesn't seem to care about the blood that stains his skin now as well as mine. He's not even looking at it. He's looking at me as if I've suddenly become interesting to him.

"Why aren't you scared?" he asks mildly.

I'm already off-balance because of his hold on me, and the unexpected question knocks me even further off. "I am scared," I tell him, before I can pretend otherwise.

"No, you're not." He searches my face. "You weren't scared at the beach that night, either."

"Oh sure," I say. "I loved having some stranger try to choke me to death on the beach."

"Really?" That black brow lifts. "Shall I try again?"

"Feel free." I'm breathing faster now, adrenaline pouring through me, making me reckless. It's like I'm on the world's scariest rollercoaster and I can't get off, and all I can do is ride it till the end.

His gaze drops to my scarf and, still holding onto my wrist, he reaches out and pulls the scarf away, baring my throat and the bruises he put there. Something flickers in his eyes as he notes them, the first sign of emotion I've seen in him, but I don't know what it means or if it means anything at all.

"Why didn't you tell your Hound friend about me?" He keeps staring at my throat. "Or your father?"

"None of your business." I'm not telling him anything and certainly not that. "Now, either finish strangling me or get the fuck out of the women's bathroom."

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Chapter Six

LUCIEN

Her eyes are very wide, the grey irises almost swallowed by the black of her pupils. I wasn't entirely correct, she *is* afraid, but she's also angry and defiant, which, again, I find ... interesting.

She's twenty-one, and small, fine-boned as a ballerina, yet she's daring me to kill her as if I wasn't much bigger, stronger and faster than she is. As if it wouldn't take me two seconds to snap her neck.

It's not fatalism. If it was, she wouldn't be so angry. So, what is it that's making her defy me?

Her delicate jaw is set at a stubborn angle, and I can feel the beat of the pulse in her wrist. It flutters against my fingertips fast and hard. The blood from her cut winds in a ruby bracelet around her forearm, down to her wrist, and onto the floor.

I'm not a man who is surprised often, if ever, but I was surprised to see that, can't deny it.

She was cleaning the knife when I came into the bathroom, and at first, I thought she had it for protection. Then I saw the blood dripping from underneath the cuff of her blue sweatshirt, and when I pulled the sleeve up,

I saw the cuts. Straight, neat, both the same length. Like the one on her wrist that I saw as she got herself ready for the party on the beach.

Deep enough to bleed but not deep enough to cause any real damage.

Deep enough to hurt.

Pain is a tool I use often and well, so I know when someone else is using it. And she is using it. She made those cuts herself.

After my parents were killed and Lazarus left me for dead, Enzo found me and took me to live with him. It was a hard life and his lessons were painful ones, but I learned to embrace the pain. It taught me endurance and gave me strength, but most importantly, it made me understand control.

You'd think a good little girl like Astrid wouldn't need to learn those same lessons, but she's obviously not a good little girl – not the bland, uninteresting little girl that I first thought she was.

"I don't want to kill you," I tell her, and oddly enough, it's true. I certainly would if I was ordered to, but I don't actually want to. I need her alive right now, but that's beside the point.

"Then why are you here?" she demands. "What the hell do you want?"

I glance back down to her neck, where a bruise is half-hidden by her scarf, dark against her pale skin. A bruise I put there that night at the beach.

An unexpected kick of heat goes through me at the sight, and I have to pause and take a silent breath.

Sex is nothing for me but a physical release, and there's plenty of that to be had in Enzo's house, with women who are paid good money to be available for his soldiers. I've never wanted any of them – I've trained myself not to want anything at all – but I take them now and then, because I'm a soldier not a monk.

But this ... heat is something I'm unfamiliar with. Normal women don't interest me, so I shouldn't like the sight of my marks on her skin or be curious about why she enjoys pain and isn't afraid of me or the death I could potentially have inflicted on her. Yet ... I want to know. Was that truly

surrender I saw in her eyes as I choked her? Did she like it? Did she want more?

“Did you hear me?” Astrid pulls against my hold again. “Are you even listening?”

There’s a flush in her cheeks now, and it’s pretty. It makes the ring of grey around her black pupils stand out like silver, and it goes down her neck, beneath the scarf, under her sweatshirt. A strange urge seizes me, to jerk the scarf away, rip her sweatshirt open and see just how far down that pretty pink goes.

But I’m not here for that. I’m here for one thing and that’s information. And I’ve decided on a different approach this time, since choking her didn’t seem to work.

I let go of her wrist, resisting yet another mad impulse, to lick her blood from my skin, and reach for a paper towel from the dispenser instead.

“I’m sorry.” I make my tone as apologetic as I can as I wipe the blood off my fingers. “I shouldn’t have grabbed you. I just saw the blood and...” I trail off and give her a rueful smile. “Anyway, I didn’t mean to startle you. I only wanted to find you to apologise for what happened on the beach.”

She blinks, clearly taken aback. “You wanted to apologise?”

I ball up the paper towel, toss it in the bin, then grab another and hold out my hand. “Let me clean that up for you,” I say, nodding at her arm.

This approach has put her off-balance, and she doesn’t know what to do now, so I take her arm once again, and after running the towel under the tap at the sink, I begin to dab at the blood on her skin. She stares at me as if I’m an alien straight from Mars, but she doesn’t pull away.

“I don’t have any excuse for my behaviour,” I go on, continuing to wipe her blood away. “I was out of line, way out of line. It’s just that my sister is involved with the Hellhounds and I’m trying to get information about them.” Another purposeful pause and a change of tone. “I’m worried about her.”

Astrid blinks again, her mouth slightly open. “Oh ... I ... I mean, why didn’t you just say that?”

“I should have.” I throw the towel I’m holding away, grab a third, wet it, and then clean up the rest of her forearm. Her skin is very pale and very smooth. It feels like silk beneath my fingertips. “But she’s been missing for a couple of days, and I’d had a few beers, and I guess I was going a little out of my mind.”

A crease appears between Astrid’s fair brows. “If you’d told me, I could have talked to my friend Wolf. You know, the guy who hugged me.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t thinking properly,” I say. “I fucked that one up, didn’t I?” I make one last pass of the towel over her skin without touching the cuts, which have clotted nicely, then I release her arm, straighten, and toss that towel in the bin along with the others. “Let me buy you a drink to make up for it.”

She’s edging away from me, pulling down the sleeve of her sweatshirt and eyeing me warily, not trusting me one inch. “You know, I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” she says, shrugging the strap of her backpack higher on her shoulder. “I’ve got a lot of work to do and—”

“Oh, come on,” I interrupt easily, turning with her as she edges around me, trying to make for the door. “It’s just one drink and it won’t take long. I’ll even promise not to choke you afterwards.” The door is at my back and I’m blocking it. She can’t leave unless I move.

Her jaw is tight, her chin lifted. Suspicion glitters in her eyes. Little Tinkerbell isn’t stupid. She wants to believe in my change of mood, but she can’t quite let herself yet.

I find myself pleased by her doubt, which is odd considering I need her to believe me. Or maybe I don’t need her to. Maybe I’ll just grab her by the throat again, push her up against the door, take that little knife of hers and cut pieces off her until she gives me what I want.

Frankly, both sound like fun.

“Um...” Her gaze darts to the door and back again. “I don’t know. I’ve got an assignment that I need to finish. Three assignments, actually.”

It’s sweet how she thinks I’ll let her refuse me.

I give her my friendliest smile. “One hour, I promise. We can chat about the club, and then you can go home. Or...” I pause for effect. “Or, I can tell your father that his little girl has been cutting herself in the bathroom at college.”

This time the flush that storms through her cheeks is bright red, sparks of anger leaping in her eyes. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

I shrug. “Take it or leave it.”

“He’d never believe you.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t hear it from me. He’d hear it from the student counsellor that you’ve been talking to for the past few weeks.”

“But I haven’t been talking to a counsellor.”

“Haven’t you? That’s a shame. Seems like you need to.”

She’s breathing faster now, her colour mounting. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what? Asking you out for a drink?”

“You’ve been following me, haven’t you? Bumping into me outside the bathroom a few days ago wasn’t an accident, was it?”

She’s smart, this girl. If I’m not careful she might stumble into guessing more about me than I want her to know.

“A drink,” I say easily. “I’ll answer your questions if you answer mine.”

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Chapter Seven

ASTRID

I must be crazy. I must have gone straight past the deep end and sailed directly into the Mariana Trench.

I'm in Love Bite, the student bar on Main, actually having a drink with the psychopath who choked me.

I insisted on us meeting there, because I didn't want to get into his car by myself. It's crowded as per usual. There are a few other bars in Blackwater, but one is a fancy wine bar with overpriced drinks, and the other is Rusty's Place, the biker bar where the Hellhounds hang out.

The mood is raucous inside, with people sitting around large tables lit by low pendants, or in booths along one wall. There's a pool table and dartboard down the back, and a TV over the bar, though no one's watching it.

I shouldn't be here, I really shouldn't, but he didn't give me much of a choice. He saw my cuts, and I don't know how, but he knew what they meant, and he used them to make me come out with him.

If I was braver, I would have told him to fuck off, that he could tell Dad, I didn't care. I'm not seeing a goddamn counsellor, either. But the fact is that I *do* care. I don't want Dad to know I cut myself. I don't want him to

know that I'm struggling and lonely and afraid. I don't want him to know that part of my fear is for him, because he doesn't go out and he doesn't socialise. He spends all his time watching TV or working, and I'm worried he's depressed, and I don't know what to do. I don't know how to have that conversation with him.

God, I don't know how to have any kind of conversation with my father.

Anyway, idiot that I am, I agreed to come for this drink, even though all my threat senses are telling me it's a mistake. That Lucien's story about his sister and how he wanted to apologise to me are lies. I mean, they have to be, right?

No one goes from choking you one minute, to smiling and inviting you out for a drink the next. Definitely psychopath material. Especially when that smile of his didn't reach his eyes. It didn't look natural, more like ... practised. It gave me chills, and not the good kind.

I'm sitting in a booth along one wall, and I glance at the bar where Lucien is ordering us a drink. He's a head taller than everyone else and dressed in the same black clothing he wore at the beach. People are giving him a wide berth, as if they can subconsciously sense that he's dangerous, and are trying to put distance between him and them. Though, every now and then, I see women glance at him as if they can't take their eyes off him. Women drawn to the bad guy, to the villain.

They're idiots. They're idiots just like me.

Lucien turns from the bar at last and the pressure begins to build inside me again. A clock slowly ticking the seconds and minutes away, time I could be using to redo Professor Bright's assignment.

I try to breathe through it. It's just one drink, that's all. One drink, then I'll go.

He comes back to the booth carrying two violent-pink Cosmos.

"Didn't pick you for a pink-drink kind of guy," I say as he puts them down on the table then sits in the booth opposite me.

“What kind of guy did you pick me for?”

“Vodka. Neat.” I reach for the Cosmo and take a sip. It’s far too sweet, but I keep sipping anyway. “Or Scotch,” I add, not knowing what else to say. “On the rocks.”

His gaze doesn’t waver, but the odd, enigmatic half-smile turning his mouth makes me stare at it for some reason. It’s a beautiful mouth, just like the rest of him. “I’ll drink anything,” he says. “I don’t have favourites.”

I take another sip, the alcohol sitting warmly in my gut. I’m not a big drinker, but this rollercoaster I’m on is taking me far away from my comfort zone, and I need the courage. “So, were you following me?” I ask, deciding to tackle this head-on. I don’t have the time to screw around.

He leans back in his seat, tilting his head like a raptor, watching me, assessing me. “Like I said, I’ll answer your questions if you answer mine.”

“Ladies first, then,” I say.

He inclines his head. “What can I say? I’m a gentleman.”

“A gentleman who chokes people.”

“The choking thing again. You’re not going to let that go, are you?”

“Would you?”

“No.” The smile on his face deepens. “Anyone tried choking me, I’d kill them.”

He says it casually, a throwaway line, but there’s something dark and sharp in the fabric of his voice, like razor wire hidden in black velvet. And I remember him on the beach, and his fingers around my throat, and the cold, empty look in his eyes.

He means it. He really would kill anyone who tried.

A shiver arrows down my spine. Who the hell is this guy?

Surreptitiously I look around the bar in case anyone I know is here, so I could maybe get help if I need it. But the bar is full of strangers, and not for the first time I feel the lack of friends.

“No one’s coming to rescue you, Red Riding Hood,” Lucien says in a soft, dark voice. “You’re all alone with the big bad wolf.”

Another tremor goes through me, and I steel myself, forcing myself to meet his relentless stare. “Then cut the crap. You’re not here for your goddamn sister, so what the hell is it that you want?”

Something flickers in his eyes, another reaction that I can’t read, yet it makes the breath catch in my throat. It’s almost as if he likes me challenging him, as if it surprises him in some way, which is weird. I wouldn’t have thought a man like him would appreciate being refused.

“I didn’t lie about my sister,” he says mildly. “She *is* caught up with the MC. And I’m a little concerned she might attract the wrong attention. From your father, say.”

I frown, not understanding where he’s going with this. “My father?”

“He’s the chief of police, yes? He seems to give the club a lot of leeway.”

I pick up my drink and take another sip, giving myself some time to think about just what the hell he’s asking me. Leeway. What does he mean, “leeway”?

I don’t know the ins and outs of Wolf’s club, but I’m not an idiot. I know they’re not exactly squeaky clean. But they don’t cause trouble in town, at least not that I’ve ever seen. Dad and Wolf have a good relationship – he talks to Wolf more than he talks to me – so I can’t imagine that whatever the club does, they keep it hidden from the law. Dad would come down hard on them if they did, because one thing I do know about my father is that he’s good at his job.

“The club don’t cause trouble,” I say, gulping down the rest of my Cosmo. “No leeway is needed.” I put the empty glass down on the table. “I’ve finished my one drink. Is that all you wanted to know?”

“It seems very unlike an outlaw, motorcycle club not to cause trouble,” he says. “Are you sure about that?”

My heartbeat is accelerating, something winding tight inside me. I have no idea who this guy is or why he needs to know about Dad and the club, but he's dangerous and I shouldn't be sitting here with him. I shouldn't be talking about this with him.

"Believe me," I say, "if anything illegal was happening at the club, my dad would be on it like a ton of bricks."

Lucien lifts a brow. "Is that so?"

I stare at his fallen-angel face, at the hard, perfect lines of it. He's impossible to read, yet I'm abruptly certain he knows more than he's letting on.

"Why do you want to know?" I demand. "Why are you asking me these questions? What do you want with the club?"

He doesn't reply immediately, merely reaches out and picks up his Cosmo and takes a sip. It should look ridiculous, this man all dressed in black denim and leather, sipping on the pink drink he's holding in one tattooed hand. Yet he doesn't. He looks like a tiger, slowly eating a delicate, feathered bird.

"I don't think that's any of your business," he says after a moment.

"Fine." I grab my backpack, because I don't want to sit here another second. "I'll see you round, then."

"*Stop.*"

I've half risen to my feet when he says it, and his voice is so cold and hard and authoritative that I instinctively do what he says.

He hasn't moved a muscle, still lounging back in the booth, toying with his drink, his big, muscled body relaxed. But the expression on his face is stone.

"Sit down, Tinkerbell," he says. "I haven't finished."

Anger pools in my gut, hot and raw. I've got an assignment to redo, other assignments to finish, and exams to study for, and the last thing I need

is some random stranger's bullshit. Especially the random stranger who tried to choke me. And no, I'm not letting that go.

"Too bad," I snap, hauling my backpack onto my shoulder. "Because I have."

Then before he can say another word, I leave.

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Chapter Eight

LUCIEN

A strid's out of the booth before I can stop her, threading her way through the other tables, heading to the door.

Fuck.

I underestimated her. I thought that the threat of telling Good Chief Starling about her little cutting habit would be enough to keep her here, but either she forgot about that, or she just doesn't care. Given the fury that crossed her face when I threatened her with it, I'm thinking she forgot. Which means I need to remind her, because I haven't gotten what I wanted from her yet.

I put the cocktail down on the table and start after her, not rushing because she won't be able to get away from me, not if I don't want her to.

Silly Tinkerbell, thinking I'd simply let her leave.

She's so spiky and suspicious of me – with good reason, I'll give her that – but I have to admit I'm quite enjoying her spark. No one gives me lip anymore, not the way she does, not when I can kill a man with my bare hands.

Enzo sometimes calls me The Terminator, after the old Schwarzenegger movie, and it's a point of pride for him that I'm relentless when it comes to

carrying out his orders. It's a point of pride for me, too. Enzo rescued me, he brought me up – and while he's not quite the father I never had, he isn't far from it. In fact, I'm the example he holds up to the rest of the family: of loyalty and unquestioning obedience. And even though I don't have any particular rank, his will is mine, and I am his right hand.

I push the door of the bar open and step outside. I can't see her immediately, so I get out my phone and use the spyware I installed on hers to locate her. She hasn't gone far. She's hiding in the alley next to the bar, likely hoping that I'll walk past without seeing her.

It's dark in the street and the wind that comes from the mountains is cold. I can feel the bite of snow in the air. There's no one else around, and if I was her, I wouldn't have chosen a dark alleyway to hide, not from a man like me. Not when the darkness is where I live.

I stroll to the alley entrance and pause, making a show of glancing up and down the street, as if I haven't seen her in the shadows, pressed to the brick wall as if she's trying to push her whole body through it.

I don't normally play with my prey, but there's something about her fear, something about her defiance and her anger that I'm enjoying in a way I haven't in a long time. It makes me want to test her, push her to see what she'll do.

She stays still and very quiet, but it's too late. The alley only has one entrance and I'm standing in it. She can't get out.

I stop searching the street and look straight at her. "You chose here to hide? Really? A dark, deserted alley?"

Now she's been spotted, she shoves herself away from the wall, that stubborn chin of hers lifted, determinedly clutching the strap of her backpack. In her jeans, dark blue BU sweatshirt, a denim jacket thrown over the top, her hair a cloud of silver curls around her shoulders, she looks vulnerable in the darkness. So delicate, so breakable – yet she doesn't seem to recognise her own vulnerability. She's staring at me as if she wants to

bite my head off, completely ignoring the fact that I'm nearly a foot taller than she is.

It's almost ... sweet.

"I'm not hiding," she says resolutely. "I was calling my dad."

I know every text and call she makes, and she wasn't calling her dad.

"I don't think you were." I stroll into the alley. "I think you were hiding from me."

She shifts on her feet, glancing behind her and then over my shoulder, marking the fact that she's trapped. But she doesn't move. She stands her ground, lifting her chin even higher.

There's a streetlight behind me and it shines on her face. Her skin is so pale and smooth, it's almost translucent, and her scarf has slipped, revealing those bruises again. The ones I put there.

That kick of heat I felt earlier, when I found her in the bathroom and discovered those marks, kicks again, and harder this time. But I ignore it. I've never let my cock do my thinking for me.

Still, as I get closer to her, she starts backing away, and I can't resist the urge to keep walking. It's the hunter in me. I like the chase, I always have, and it's especially good when I have my prey boxed in, with nowhere to run to.

She continues to back away until she hits the brick wall behind her, and her eyes widen with alarm when I don't stop until I'm only inches from her, looking down at her pressed against the wall.

Her breathing is loud and fast in the silence of the alley, yet she's still got that chin up, and there's a hot silver glitter in her eyes. She's scared, but she's also furious, and it's an oddly fascinating combination. Fear is the emotion I tend to inspire, not anger. Not when I'm this close to them. Because when I'm this close to them, they can see their own death in my eyes.

Everyone's afraid of death right at the end. Everyone.

She isn't, though.

No, she seems to welcome it like a long, lost lover.

I stare down into her grey-eyed gaze, wondering what exactly is so bad about her life that death is blessed escape. She has a roof over her head and one parent still living. She's smart and she's studying at college. She's got a job, a direction, purpose. I didn't have any of those things, yet death was never an option for me.

So what is it that makes her so different?

Almost unconsciously, my gaze drops to the lush curve of her mouth, and lower, to that pretty neck where the marks of my fingertips are hidden by her scarf. The urge comes out of nowhere and I'm reaching out to pull her scarf completely away before I can stop myself.

She catches her breath but doesn't move. "If you're going to do it, do it quickly. And this time don't fuck it up."

I can't drag my gaze away from that necklace of bruises and the silver star in the hollow of her throat. Her tone is all bravado, so to test her I raise my hand and gently match my fingertips to each bruise, my palm resting over the star, feeling her pulse. Her skin is as warm as I remember, and she smells of lavender with a faint, coppery tinge of blood.

Her lashes sweep down, a veil over her eyes, and I watch as all her fear and anger suddenly dissipates, her body relaxing against the bricks behind her. Her pulse has slowed. She's surrendering to me the way she did that night on the beach. She's expecting me to choke her right here and now, and she's okay with it.

"You think I'm going to let you off that easily?" I murmur, my thumb absently stroking the side of her neck, her skin silky and warm. "When I haven't got what I want from you yet?"

Her lashes shiver then lift and she looks up at me, her eyes black in the shadows of the alley. "I don't know anything," she says, again with that hint of defiance. "Not about the club."

“Your friend is an enforcer.”

“So? He doesn’t talk about it with me.”

“You never ask?”

“No.” She shivers and her breath catches as I continue the lazy back and forth stroke of my thumb against her neck. “He wouldn’t tell me anyway.”

I wasn’t wholly aware that I was still stroking her, too busy trying to read her face, but now I realise that she’s got her head tilted slightly to one side, as if she likes my touch.

Only fools and animals act without thinking, and I am neither, yet I’m gently tightening my grip on her throat before I know what I’m doing. There’s no reason for me to do this. I don’t want to kill her. Yet there’s something about the feel of her skin and the steady beat of her pulse against my palm, the thread of her fragile life, that makes me want to tighten my grip.

There’s an obvious power trip to be had when you hold someone’s life in your hand. When you are the one who can give life or take it away. Some like me are addicted to that power. But I’ve always been wary of giving in to that rush. Once you get a taste for it, you can’t stop, and that’s when you cease to be a weapon. That’s when you become the one who wields it.

And that’s not my purpose. My purpose is dealing with some family business, not choking a potential informant.

Except, I can feel her breathing, and she’s looking up at me, and her mouth is the most perfect bow. Full and lush. The heat inside me kicks yet again, much stronger this time, and I can’t stop myself. I move my thumb from the side of her neck and brush the pad of it along her bottom lip; and yes, it’s as soft as I thought it would be.

Her eyes widen, her breath shivers in her throat, but she doesn’t move as I brush over her bottom lip again, following the soft, pillowy line of it. I don’t think I’ve ever touched a woman purely for the pleasure of feeling her skin against mine, and I don’t know why I’m doing it now. But she’s not

protesting. No, it seems as if she likes me touching her in this way, and really, the feel of her is ... exceptional.

She's a target, remember?

That's true. And you don't fuck a target, no matter how interesting she's turning out to be or how soft she feels.

So, I ignore the heat and my hardening cock and get back to the plan that I've been turning over for the past few minutes.

Whatever understanding is between the police and the club, it's not on paper, and getting the details direct from the chief himself is problematic when we're not supposed to be drawing attention to ourselves. Which means I'm going to have to take the indirect approach, and that involves Astrid.

"In that case," I murmur, pressing down on her bottom lip. "I'm going to need you to try harder."

She's shivering now, looking up at me from underneath those lashes. I've got my hand on her throat again and she should be scared. She should be giving me everything I want.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she opens her mouth and bites down hard on my thumb.

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Chapter Nine

ASTRID

His skin tastes salty and I'm sure I managed to draw blood, because there's also the faint tang of copper in my mouth, but he jerks his hand away before I can tell for sure. His eyes aren't cold any longer, they're blazing gas-flame-blue, every line of his beautiful face drawn tight.

Shit. That was a stupid move.

I tense, expecting some kind of show of anger, a blow even, but his expression changes, his mouth curving in a hint of a smile that this time seems completely natural. As if he's genuinely amused that I bit him.

"Tinkerbell has some claws I see," he says, a note in his dark, deep voice that I don't recognise.

It takes me off-guard, that and his smile, and I'm already off-guard. No, scratch that, I'm not off-guard, I'm entirely destabilised. As if the world has shifted on its axis and is now spinning on a completely new rotation.

He was right, it was stupid to hide here, but when I left the bar, I knew he'd follow me, I just knew it, and I didn't have the time to hide anywhere else but this damn alley.

It's not the alley that's the problem, though. It's him.

It's him backing me up against the bricks, his fingers wrapped around my throat, how he pressed them into my skin. Making those bruises hurt. How he stroked the side of my neck, then brushed his thumb across my bottom lip.

He was standing so close, and he was so hot, and he smelled like woodsmoke and dark spice, and his fingers were so warm, and my body got so confused. The pain felt good, felt right, felt like the knife against my skin, cutting me open and letting all the fear out.

I've never had sex before. Yeah, I'm a virgin at twenty-one, so sue me. It's not because I don't want it, either, I've just never met anyone I wanted enough to have it with. Or rather, no one has ever actively wanted to have it with me.

I thought attraction would be warm, fuzzy feelings and shy smiles and a growing need to kiss someone. I thought it would be for some nice guy with floppy hair, who was maybe studying to be a doctor like me. Who was quiet like me, and who maybe wanted to hold my hand.

I didn't think it would be this sudden hot rush between my legs when the rough pad of his thumb brushed over my bottom lip, or the weird, almost desperate need for his fingers to press harder, make it hurt so all my fears disappear.

It was wrong to feel that way, though. So desperately wrong, and there's already too much wrongness in my life. I don't have the space for any more.

His thumb was right there, and I was angry, and he was being a dick, so yeah, I bit him. I should have thought more about the consequences of that, but I acted on instinct, yet now he's staring at me as if I've done something interesting.

"Not claws," I say, pushing myself away from the wall and straight into him, because fuck him. "Teeth, asshole."

He doesn't move an inch, so I'm pressed against him. He's very hard and very hot, and this was another stupid move. But I'm not going to let

him bully me. I'm not going to let him intimidate or cow me, just because he's physically stronger and bigger than I am.

"You're a very interesting woman, Astrid Starling," he says, his gaze still blazing.

"And you're a prick, Lucien whoever you are," I fire back.

"Frost," he says unexpectedly. "Lucien Frost."

"You could be James Bond and you'd still be a prick."

He studies me intently and then, with a certain amount of deliberation, he lifts his thumb to his mouth and licks the place where I bit it. And I can't help but watch, because he has the most perfect mouth, and when his tongue licks his skin, I feel another rush of liquid heat somewhere inside me.

"You are going to do something for me," he says, as if I've already agreed. "You are going to find out why your father gives the MC free rein, and you are going to pass that information on to me."

"He doesn't give them free rein," I insist. "If there was something going on—"

"There *is* something going on," Lucien interrupts. "Your enforcer friend is helping run weapons through the port, right under your father's nose, and the chief isn't doing a thing to stop it."

Shock makes me step back, the bricks hitting my spine once more. Weapons? What?

Lucien's gaze misses nothing. "You didn't know?"

"No." I'm too taken aback to pretend otherwise.

"Well, you do now." The light from the street shines on his ink-black hair and accents the straight line of his nose and cheekbones. He's got the longest, thickest lashes I've ever seen on a man.

It can't be true, though, what he's telling me. It's *not* true. Dad would never let something like that happen in Blackwater, and I can't believe Wolf would involve himself in it, either.

“No,” I say. “You’re lying. It isn’t true.”

He says nothing. His expression has hardened, the blue flame that was in his eyes now snuffed out, as if it hadn’t been there at all.

“No,” I repeat. “Dad wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t.”

But the look on Lucien’s face doesn’t change. “I don’t have time to give you proof.” All the amusement has bled out of his voice now, too, and it’s as cold and dark as the ocean beyond Main Street. “I want you to find out why your father lets that operation continue.” He steps back from me. “You have two days.”

I stare at him as what he’s just said sinks in, trickling icily through me like snowmelt. “But I—”

“Two days,” he repeats, then turns for the alley exit.

“Wait.” I step away from the wall, my legs shaky, trying to reach for my anger. “No, I’m not doing that.”

He doesn’t turn. “Then tell your father to expect a call from the college counsellor. I’m sure he’ll be understanding.”

I swallow, my heart beating fast and hard as Lucien’s tall form exits the alley and disappears down the street.

I can’t believe what he just told me. It isn’t true. There’s no weapons thing happening in the port that Dad knows about. I mean, he couldn’t know, could he? Because if he did, it wouldn’t be happening, period. So, there’s no point in me talking to him about it, because it isn’t happening.

Right? *Right?*

My thoughts are out of control, tumbling over and over themselves, and I can’t get a grip on any of them. Weapons. Wolf. The MC. My dad. And Lucien wants me to talk to him? Actually, talk to my father? About something that may not even be true? And if I don’t, he’ll somehow tell Dad that I cut myself?

A hot shame laces through my icy shock. I can’t have that conversation with Dad, I can’t. We talk about innocuous things. Things that don’t matter.

Every so often, he'll ask how my studies are going and I tell him they're going great. I'm busy, of course, but it's all going fine, and he nods as if that's exactly what he expects.

If he found out about my cutting, I don't know what he'd do. Would he think I was weak? Would he be ashamed of me? Or would he not even care? Just shrug and tell me I need therapy, and never mention it again?

All this and I haven't even started that assignment do-over.

The balloon in my chest is inflating, pushing against my ribs again, making it difficult to breathe, but I force away the sensation. I haven't got time for panic attacks. I've got to get home and pretend this whole thing with Lucien Frost never happened. At least for now.

It's starting to rain so I make a dash for my car, and when I get home, I find Dad in the living room, sitting in his brown lounge, his attention glued to the TV in the corner, by the fireplace.

I pause in the doorway like I always do. "Hey, Dad," I say. "Did you find the lasagna in the fridge?" I made it this morning, because if I don't cook him dinner, he doesn't eat.

"Yeah." He doesn't turn from the TV. "Thanks."

I swallow. "Did ... did you have a good day?"

This time he actually glances at me, though he looks away just as quickly, as if he can't bear the sight of me. "Yeah," he repeats. "You?"

No. It was horrible. I had to plead to redo an assignment, then I cut myself in the bathroom. Then a terrifying stranger blackmailed me into having a drink with him, before putting his hands around my throat in a dark alleyway, and telling me that Wolf is involved in a weapons thing at the port, and that you let it happen.

But I don't say any of that.

"Good," I say, my eyes prickling with ridiculous tears that come out of nowhere and are likely a shock reaction. "It was good."

Dad grunts, which means it's the end of the conversation, so I blink hard and continue upstairs.

My bedroom is my safe haven. I have a white wrought-iron bed, covered by a patchwork quilt that used to be my mom's, with lots of bright pillows everywhere. The walls are covered in photos and prints and posters and postcards, and the bookcases are full of my favourite books. It's cluttered, my room, but I don't care. It's the one place I allow a little controlled chaos to run wild, even if it is only in the shape of cat-themed knick-knacks. We can't have a cat, sadly, because Dad's allergic, so I buy fake ones instead.

I shut the door, then dump my backpack and take out my laptop. I carry it over to my desk pushed beneath the main window and put it down. I roll back my chair, and sit, staring at the closed laptop for a long moment, the pressure in my chest so intense that I know I'm not going to be able to concentrate. So, I get up again, get my knife from my backpack, then sit on my bed, and look at the photo on my nightstand.

It's an old photo, overexposed and faintly out of focus. A young woman is sitting in a tree, bare legs dangling, white-blonde hair in a cloud around her head. She's laughing at whoever is taking the picture and she's so intense and alive and beautiful.

She's my mom, Carrie. I've been told I look like her, though I'm just a faded copy. Like the printer used all the ink for her, leaving me only a duller facsimile.

No wonder Dad doesn't like looking at me. He lost his beautiful wife and got me in return.

I turn the photo to face the wall, because she shouldn't have to see what I do, then take my sweatshirt off – I'll have to put some stain remover on the cuff to take out the blood – and I lay my arm on my thigh. The other arm this time. This one has silver lines on it, too, but a few more won't hurt.

I draw the knife across my skin, which parts like tissue paper, the blood welling up along with all my fears and nightmares. The pain takes them, washes them away, washes me clean so I can start again.

It's better than crying and it's quieter. It takes less time.

Afterwards, I clean myself feeling calmer, freer, then sit at my desk and open my laptop. Lucien Frost will have to wait. I have an assignment to redo and an A plus to get.

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Chapter Ten

LUCIEN

Home is twenty minutes out of Blackwater, heading north up toward the mountains. It's isolated, down a long gravel drive and in the middle of some pine woods. The house itself is modern, all stone and glass, and surrounded by discreet high security fences. There are a few outbuildings and garages, so it's more of a compound than anything else. Lazarus has a few soldiers who keep watch on the gate and guard the perimeter, but they're discreet, too.

No one in Blackwater knows that there's a fortress surrounded by armed guards just outside the city limits.

I'm sitting on the black leather modular couch in the living room, a low coffee table in front of me. It faces the floor-to-ceiling windows and the view out into the forest beyond the house, but I'm not interested in the view. I'm checking the camera feeds from Astrid's house on my laptop.

I've watched her pass through the hallway and pause to greet her father. And I saw the flicker of anguish on her face when he looked away from her. Then she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, took out her little knife and cut her arms again.

I saw the bright blood that flowed across her skin and the look on her face. Blissed out as if the heroin had just kicked in. But heroin isn't her drug of choice. It's pain.

Now she's sitting at her desk, concentrating on what looks like a biochemistry assignment. That's what she's chosen to do after an encounter with me, where I threatened her with telling her father about the cutting.

She's doing her assignment. That's fucking determination, right there.

I tilt my head, trying to understand why she's not talking to her father right now. She stopped outside the doorway, but she didn't go in. Why not? It seems ludicrous that she'd be scared of asking him about the club, since she's not scared of me, so what made her hesitate? And why the cutting? What does she get out of it? Pleasure? Relief? What?

There's no reason for my interest, yet I don't stop looking at her as she concentrates fiercely on her assignment. She's not what I expected, perhaps that explains it. I don't know anyone else who would have bitten my thumb, for example. That amused me, which is strange since amusement isn't an emotion I often feel. She was like a kitten taking a bite out of an elephant, as if she wasn't at all afraid that I could have stomped on her and crushed her flat.

What forces go into making a woman like her? A dedicated student, a loyal daughter – on the outside, a woman easily moulded. But she's not as easily moulded as I anticipated. She's stubborn, determined, and she has claws.

A movement in the air behind me suggests someone is approaching, and I push the laptop closed. For some reason, I don't want anyone else looking at her and seeing her secrets. They're mine and mine alone.

"Is that the chief's place?" It's Lazarus's deep voice coming from behind me.

"Yes," I reply. "Just checking the feeds."

He comes around the side of the couch and sits down in one of the black leather armchairs. “Found anything yet?”

“No, not yet. Nothing at the station or his house, so I assume there’s nothing on paper.” I pause. “You sure we can’t go direct to the source?”

“We could.” Lazarus leans back in the armchair, his tall, rangy figure stretched out, his fingers laced behind his head. He’s in a dark suit, which means he’s been to the city today. “We could wander into the station and ask ‘Hey chief, help us out here. Why do you let the MC smuggle arms through the port? Are they paying you? Can we have a piece of that pie, too?’ I’m sure the chief would be only too happy to tell us and wouldn’t call all the stations in the vicinity for backup. He might even get the MC involved and then it would be a real party.”

We’ve been through this and I can see his reasoning. We can’t take on the police and the MC both at once, so we have to be strategic. I could, of course, use Astrid as leverage to get the chief to speak and it might come to that at some point. But until then, there’s no reason to go balls to the wall straight away, not when we don’t have some allies in place yet.

“Good thing we have the girl, then,” I say.

“The daughter?” Lazarus glances at me. He’s got the same black hair and blue eyes that I do, though he’s not quite as tall as I am, and his eyes are a bit lighter. He’s also got a sprinkling of white at his temples and along his jawline. He’s only eight years older than I am, and shouldn’t be going grey yet, but it’s a hard world we live in. It ages you.

“Yes.” I put the laptop on the coffee table and consider what happened with Astrid earlier. “I talked to her tonight, and apparently her dad doesn’t know anything about the dealings at the port.” It surprised me that she hadn’t thought about her father’s relationship with her best friend’s club, but it seemed she really hadn’t. The shock on her face when I told her about the port operation was real, and once again I wonder if she ever thought about what her friend gets up to with his MC brothers. She must have,

surely? Does he know what she does with her little knife in the stalls at college? Or sitting on her bed late at night?

An unwelcome thread of heat winds through me, remembering the sight of her red blood against her pale skin, and the look of release on her face. Remembering the bruises on her throat and how, when I touched those bruises again in the alley, all the tension went out of her. How soft her bottom lip felt and how she tilted her head to the side to give me more access to her neck...

Abruptly, I'm conscious of Lazarus's sharp gaze on me, so I push the heat aside. That's a distraction I don't need, not when he's watching everything I do.

He's still not quite sure of me. All he knows is that last month, I finally found him and the others after years of searching for them. I told them that I managed to escape the bloodbath of our parents' deaths, went straight into the foster system, and after I aged out, I spent a long time trying to find them.

I made it sound good, the long-lost brother everyone gave up for dead returning to the family fold – and with a whole lot of very useful skills, such as expert marksmanship, an affinity for pain, and a ruthless streak a mile wide. But Lazarus isn't a fool. Trust is rare in our world, and I've been gone for twenty years, so for him, where my loyalties lie is uncertain.

Of course, I know where my loyalties lie. With Enzo. I've hunted down my family on his orders, and they don't know I'm working for him. They don't know that their own plans in Blackwater tie in nicely with Enzo's and that he's going to use them to do his dirty work for him. Then, once they've taken over the Hellhounds' operation, I'll be handing control over to Enzo.

Then he'll release me from my oaths to him and I'll finally be free.

Anyway, it's been a month and I think Lazarus is starting to trust I'm on his side. The other two trusted immediately. Thea flung her arms around me

the moment she saw me, and Killian slapped me on the back, looking a little misty-eyed.

“And you believe her?” Lazarus asks now.

I meet his gaze. “She was shocked when I told her.”

“You think telling her was wise?”

“We need to know what arrangement the chief and the club president have, and there’s nothing on paper,” I say. “So, I’m trying another approach.”

“Using her?”

“She’ll get the information from her father. I’ve given her two days.”

Lazarus frowns. “I assume you’ve got some leverage, so she doesn’t tell her fucking dad that we’re sniffing around asking questions.”

“Of course,” I say smoothly, remembering the flash of anger that crossed her face when I threatened to tell her father about the cutting. She didn’t like that one bit. “She won’t say a word.”

Lazarus nods then looks up at the ceiling, quiet for a beat. Then he asks, “You remember anything about our childhood?”

I stay relaxed and don’t react, because it’s not an idle question. He’s still testing my loyalty. I was only eight when Enzo took me, so I didn’t grow up with Lazarus or the others. He protected Thea and Killian for years, he knows them and they know him, but they don’t know me. I’m an unknown quantity, and an unknown quantity is always subject to suspicion.

However, I do have one advantage. Lazarus wants to believe me. He wants to believe that the little brother he used to walk home from school with every day is still there. The little brother who used to hero-worship him, following him around everywhere he went.

Unfortunately for him, that little boy died along with our parents.

I’m someone else now. I’m someone different.

“You, waiting for me after school every day,” I say. “You used to save half a candy bar for me.”

He nods, his mouth curving at the memory. “I always wanted to eat the whole thing, but you’d whine all the way home if I didn’t give you half.”

I don’t remember that part. “Come on, I was a little angel.”

He grunts a laugh. “You were a little shit.”

“We have a problem.”

I look up to see Thea striding into the living room. She’s tall, black-haired and elegant, with the same blue eyes the rest of us have. Tonight, she’s in a black dress that wraps lovingly around her figure, with black stilettos that have red soles. I’ve learned that she has a taste of expensive clothes, and as Lazarus’s underboss, she uses them to enhance her femininity, turning it into a weapon that makes soldiers scramble to do her bidding. It’s unusual for a woman to have the rank she does, but Thea doesn’t let that get in her way. She’s as ruthless as Lazarus and I are.

Thea’s the closest to me in age, and I remember her being wide-eyed, quiet and watchful as a kid. She also used to carry a plastic My Little Pony around with her everywhere she went.

Lazarus sits up and scowls. “What problem?”

Thea sits down gracefully on the couch next to me. “My plant in the club saw Angelo Moretti in that godforsaken bar that they all hang out at.”

Lazarus tenses. “Fuck.”

Angelo Moretti is the son of Carlos Moretti, who was Dad’s partner in crime when they were skimming money from the Vaccaris – the biggest and most powerful of the families. Carlos ratted Dad out to the Vaccaris to save his own skin, and if his son Angelo is here, it means someone told them we were in Blackwater, and Carlos needs confirmation. He’s probably wanting to report us back to the Vaccaris to stay in their good graces, not to mention tie up loose ends. Us being the loose ends.

Killian trails in. “I ran his plates, Tee,” he says, coming over to sit in the armchair opposite Lazarus. “It’s definitely Moretti.”

Killian was only four when our parents were killed and I don't remember much about him, other than he never sat still and never did what he was told. He also used to follow me around like a bad smell. Looks-wise, he takes after our mother, his hair dark brown with streaks of tawny, his eyes a light, icy-blue.

While Lazarus is the head of the family, Killian does the job of his consigliere. I'm not quite trusted enough to take on any official titles yet.

"Shit," Thea says. "My contact wasn't sure so she took his plate number so Kill could check it."

Killian is leaning back in his armchair. He's found a rubber ball from somewhere and is now trying to bounce it off the ceiling. "Good thing you did." He throws the ball and it bounces at an angle. Lazarus puts up a hand and catches it like a pro-baseball player.

"Pay attention," he snaps. "Angelo Moretti is here for a reason and it's probably because he knows we're here, too."

"He could be scouting out the Hounds' operation as well as us," Thea points out. "We're not the only ones who know about it, Laz."

Lazarus's steel blue gaze turns on her. "You weren't there were you?"

Thea gives a delicate shudder. "God, no. I hate that place."

"Even if she had been, I scrubbed us from the web, remember?" Killian's now got a pen and is fiddling with it, clicking it. "We're ghosts, Laz. He won't know us from Adam."

Lazarus is still scowling. He wants to take over the Hounds' operation so he can get a seat on the Tribunal, the cabal of thirteen families that run the world of organised crime. It's the closest we get to a government and what the Tribunal says, goes. The Vaccaris lead the Tribunal, and Lazarus wants that seat so he can take them down. It's all about vengeance for him.

He doesn't know that Enzo Vaccari is the man who made me what I am, and he's the head of his family. He was the one who ordered the hit on our

family as punishment for stealing from him, and no one escapes his justice. No one.

Well, no one except me. But I was saved in order to deliver that justice.

I'm infiltrating my own family so I can deliver them into his hands.

It's another test of my loyalty – Enzo does love his tests – but I'll pass it. I have no qualms about betraying my brothers and my sister. They ceased to be my blood the moment Enzo found me beneath my mother's dead body, took me home, and made me part of his family. And I'm grateful for that. He's where my allegiance is, not with people I feel nothing for.

"I could take him out," I say.

"What? And bring his damn father up here?" Lazarus turns his scowl on me. "That's not exactly flying under the radar."

Lazarus wants vengeance on the Morettis, too, for betraying our father and getting them killed, but the Morettis are also Tribunal. They have many allies, and we don't. We need more firepower and more support, and to get that, we need the MC's weapons operation. It's one of the most lucrative operations in the country and taking it over will give us the power to take a Tribunal seat.

"Do I look like an amateur to you?" I hold my brother's gaze. "It doesn't have to look like a hit. I can make it look like an accident."

A muscle flicks in Lazarus's jaw. "We need to find out why he's here and what he wants, so no. Leave him."

"Why don't I handle him?" Thea offers. "He was at the club hangout and since my plant is there anyway, she could approach him. See what she can get out of him."

"I thought you were working on Sawyer?" Lazarus asks.

Sawyer is the club president and Thea has a woman infiltrating the club who's trying to get an in with him in the hope of getting more information. It's proving difficult, though, because club members don't talk about club business with anyone who isn't a member, and especially not women.

“Kathie is,” Thea says, crossing her legs, the very epitome of a high-powered businesswoman. “But if I get her to talk to Moretti, that might make Sawyer jealous, which could speed things along.”

“Okay, not a bad – would you stop fucking clicking that goddamn pen, Kill.”

Killian stops clicking and sighs. “Are we done here?”

“What?” Lazarus demands. “You have somewhere more important to be?”

“He does,” Thea says. “He’s desperate to go play *Call of Duty* with a bunch of ten-year-olds.”

I watch the three of them bicker good-naturedly. They’re easy with each other; the bond between them, from twenty years of growing up together and looking out for each other, is strong. I’m not part of that ease. It’s foreign to me. I don’t know their in-jokes or references, and I don’t have that bond with them. I’m on the outside looking in.

Not that I need to be anywhere but outside. If you don’t have anyone, you can’t lose anyone, and I don’t want anyone. Not a girlfriend or a wife or children. Not a family in the way my siblings are family.

When Enzo first took me, I was so homesick I cried myself to sleep every night. I missed my mother and all I wanted was for my big brother to find me again and take me home. But Enzo had no time for a child’s tears. He had no time for a child, period. So I had to learn to be an adult very fast, to be self-sufficient, cold. To have no wants, no desires, no dreams. Nothing that could be manipulated or used against me.

Of course, I do have one particular thing that I want, one thing that Enzo has promised me on completion of this mission. He’s going to release me from my oaths to him and to the Tribunal, which means that finally, after twenty years of complete obedience, of dealing out his justice, of torture and killing, and being a weapon in his hand, I’ll be free.

I'll be free of the world I live in now, free to make my own decisions, to be the master of my own life, to never again be under someone else's control.

I will do anything for that. Anything at all. Even betray my flesh and blood.

Everything has a cost and I will pay it.

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Chapter Eleven

ASTRID

The study hall is in the Swan Building, one of the older buildings on campus, and it's kind of like how I'd imagine an old English university, with stone walls and a wooden ceiling full of exposed beams. Bookshelves line the walls, and the space is full of long tables with plenty of space to study.

It's quiet, the high windows letting in a bit of late fall sunset, and I'm down in my favourite corner, near the back, at the end of one table so I don't have to put up with neighbours.

I'm staring at my laptop screen, struggling to make sense of the chemical compounds on it, but no matter how hard I concentrate, I can't figure them out.

I'm tired from staying up most of the night finishing Professor Bright's assignment, and while I think it's better, I don't know if it's A-Plus better. I don't have time to obsess over it, though, because there's this chemistry thing to do, and midterms to start studying for, not to mention an English paper to write.

It's been two days since Lucien Frost told me about my dad and Wolf, and the Hellhounds MC. How there's some kind of weapons business going

on at the port and they're all involved. And how he wants me to get information from Dad about why the police aren't busting it wide open.

That's all the time he gave me to find out. Two days.

Hardly enough time to process what he told me, let alone actually talk to the father I haven't been able to talk to about anything important for years.

I take my glasses off and rub my eyes, that damn balloon inflating as the pressure inside me builds, and that's the problem. There are too many pressures, and I can't afford to break.

The day before, when I woke up, I decided that there was no reason why I should lose my shot at med school just because Lucien showed up. So, I've been concentrating on finishing my assignments. I'm risking Lucien making good on his threat to tell Dad about the cutting, but the two days aren't quite over yet. I've texted Wolf to ask if he had time to catch up, so tonight he's coming to our house.

Tonight, I have to find the courage to ask him if what Lucien told me is true, and I'm afraid of that conversation. For a long time, I've been talking to him as Connor Black, the boy, the friend he used to be, but now I have to talk to him like Wolf, the biker, and that man... Well, he's a stranger to me.

Connor used to be my protector, a really good guy. A little rough around the edges from his tough upbringing, but with a good heart. I honestly can't imagine him being involved in anything violent, but...

I press my fingers into my eyes hard enough that bright spots flare behind my closed lids. If he *is* involved in something like this, it will change our relationship, irrevocably.

Anger stirs in my gut, at fucking Lucien and what he wants and how, in the space of a mere couple of days, he's upended my entire life. Not that that life was going too well to start with, but it was okay. I was making the grades I wanted, at least. But now...

I hate that I feel so powerless and afraid, at the mercy of a man I don't know and whose agenda remains a mystery. And whose hand around my throat I can't stop thinking about.

The balloon presses hard against my ribs and finally, after another ten minutes of trying to breathe through my panic, I collect my stuff and make a break for the bathroom. It's occupied, unfortunately, but the stall down the end by the wall is free, so I walk quickly into it and shut the door.

I sit on the toilet lid and get out my knife. I decided to wear a skirt today – it's pleated and tartan, like a kilt – which makes things easier, so I haul my hem up to the tops of my thighs. There are faint lines there, too, from past cuts, but I need to leave the cuts on my arms to heal, so thighs it is.

I slide the blade across one thigh, and the pain is a balm, the fear escaping, a kind of calm enveloping me. For some reason I feel his hands around my throat the way they were in that alley, his fingers pressing on the bruises he'd left there from the time before, and how good that ache felt. How right.

My skin prickles and a rush of heat fills me, twining around the pain, becoming one with it, and I have to catch my breath. God, how fucked up am I that the thought of his hands, his fingers, the pain he gave, is turning me on? Maybe there's something wrong with me. Maybe that's why Dad doesn't know what to say to me. Not only do I look like Mom, but he can sense the wrongness in me, too.

I grit my teeth. No, I'm *not* that fucked up. Sure, cutting yourself isn't exactly normal behaviour, but I promised myself I'd stop once I got into med school. I just have to get through this year.

My phone vibrates in the pocket of my skirt, and I take it out, looking down at the screen. It's from Wolf confirming tonight.

9 p.m. ok?

It's a little late, but I'm assuming Lucien's two days is two *whole* days, so as long as it's before twelve, it's fine.

Yup.

See you then.

Afterwards, I clean myself up and leave the bathroom, feeling much calmer.

Outside, it's already dark, and there's an icy wind coming direct from the mountains. Being close to the sea means that in cooler months it doesn't get as cold in Blackwater as it does in other places, but the wind is a warning that the approaching winter will be a chilly one.

I pull my denim jacket more firmly around me as I walk across the quad. There are still a few people around. Not many, though – it's too cold to linger.

I hurry across the lit-up space, heading to the student parking lot where I've got Matilda parked. She's my VW Beetle, and I bought her with some money Dad gave me as a twenty-first birthday present. She's fully restored and painted a cheerful yellow, which was Mom's favourite colour.

There aren't many cars left in the lot – most everyone has gone home – and there's no one around. It's eerie walking across the concrete to Matilda, my steps echoing in the heavy silence. I've parked near the trees at the edge of the lot since it was the only space I could find, but it's not where I'd usually park since it's further away from the streetlights and much darker.

The wind blows through the pines and the boughs creak, shadows dancing on the ground. The back of my neck prickles yet again and I pick up my feet, hurrying over to the car as I fumble in my backpack for my car keys.

This is getting creepy and I don't like it. There have been a few assaults on the campus in the past year, so the university put in more lights and

cameras, and employed security, and naturally that's where my mind goes as I approach the car.

I'm at the door, keys in my hand when someone grabs my shoulder and I'm pulled violently around. I gasp in shock, my backpack falling onto the concrete beside the car as I'm roughly shoved up against Matilda's hard metal surface.

The light is behind the figure in front of me, so I can't get a good look at him, but he smells overpoweringly of expensive cologne and cigarettes. He's strong, too, his body bulky with muscle and fat, and he presses it against me as he covers my mouth with his hand.

I go stiff with fear, staring up into eyes as dark as the pits of hell.

"You Astrid Starling?" he demands, keeping me pinned against the car.

Automatically, I nod, which is so goddamned stupid. I should have shaken my head, pretended to be someone else, but I'm not thinking clearly, my brain cloudy with fear.

"Good," he growls. "Get in the car. You're going to take me to your father, and if you don't, I'll fucking kill you."

Terror ices my blood. Why does he want Dad? What is he going to do to him? And why the fuck is this happening to me? This is the second time I've been gripped forcibly by a maniac, and I'm tired of it.

Anger flares up inside me, melting my terror, and I struggle. I'm sick of feeling powerless and afraid, and I'm not going down without a fight. He curses and tries to keep me pinned, my glasses falling off in the struggle. He's still got his hand covering my mouth, so I sink my teeth into the soft flesh of his palm, hoping like hell I draw blood. He grunts, jerking his hand away. "Fucking bitch," he says viciously, and something hard and unyielding is jammed against my stomach. "Get in the fucking car or I'll pull the trigger."

Oh God. He's got a gun.

I'm facing him, so I see clearly the dark figure looming up behind him. A tall figure, so tall. I'm not completely blind without my glasses, so I see that the fingers holding the knife are tattooed, the blade shining in the dark. Then those tattooed fingers move, drawing the blade smoothly and cleanly across the man's throat.

Blood gushes, staining the fingers, staining the blade, staining the dark clothes the man is wearing. He makes a strange choking sound, then falls as if bonelessly to the ground, like a puppet with its strings cut, revealing the figure standing behind him.

A man with bloodstained fingers, holding a bloody knife.

His face is like stone, the blue of his eyes lost in the darkness of the parking lot.

Lucien.

I'm paralysed with shock. All I can do is stare as he glances down at the man on the ground, crouches to wipe his bloody blade on the man's clothes, before tucking the knife into his boot and straightening. He kicks the body aside then takes a step toward me, closing the distance between us.

"Time's up, Tinkerbell," he says.

I stare up at him, Matilda's cold metal at my back, still overwhelmed by fear and shock. He just cut a man's throat in front of me, and without hesitation. His hand didn't even shake.

I knew he was dangerous, I *knew*. But it's one thing to suspect someone is capable of killing, quite another to see them actually do it in front of you.

"Wh-Who is that?" I manage to force out, my attention on the body on the ground.

"Him?" Lucien glances down then looks back at me, his cold stare glittering. "Someone in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"B-but he asked me to take him to Dad."

Lucien says nothing, studying me intently instead. He's so very close, as close as that man was, yet Lucien doesn't smell like expensive cologne. His

scent smoky, spicy, with an edge of leather, and the heat I feel radiating from him makes me shiver.

I must still be in shock, because when he raises a hand, his fingers still stained with blood, and cups the side of my face, I can't move. His touch is gentle and warm, so at odds with the last time he touched me, his fingers pressing into the bruises around my neck. So at odds with the firm slice across that man's throat.

I shiver like a tree in a high wind as I look up into his cold, empty eyes. Except ... they're not empty now, and they're not cold. No, there's something in them, a spark of heat, like that flash I saw in the alley, when he pressed his thumb into my bottom lip.

I shiver even harder. Is it ... attraction? Is that because of me?

"Did he hurt you?" Lucien asks, his voice deep and rough, the spark in his eyes getting hotter and hotter.

"N-No." My voice shakes and I try to steady it. "No, he didn't."

Lucien's thumb strokes across my cheekbone, sending a wave of prickling heat through me. Oh fuck, what's happening? What am I doing?

I try to go on. "I d-don't..."

He studies me like a scientist with a new discovery, stroking my cheekbone again with his bloody thumb. "Are you afraid?"

I should shove him away and run. Run fast and far so he can't find me. Put some distance between him and me and these strange things I'm feeling, because seriously? He's just killed a guy. He's still got blood on his hands. So why am I so hot? Why do I want to lean into that hand the way I did in the alley? Why the fuck am I even letting him touch me?

But I don't move. Instead, I lift my chin. "No," I say, lying through my teeth.

"That's good," he says.

Then he bends his head and puts his mouth on mine.

Chapter Twelve

LUCIEN

I never act without thinking and I never make mistakes. Everything I do is deliberate and for a reason, but there's no reason for me to be kissing Astrid Starling, none at all. Yet that's exactly what I'm doing.

She was standing right up against her little yellow car, looking up at me, her hair silver in the darkness and her skin so pale. A fall of moonlight. And all I could think about was that Angelo Moretti put his hands on her, threatened her, and that she was *my* target not his.

If I hadn't been here, she might have died and then I wouldn't know if her bottom lip tasted as soft as it felt back in that alley, when I touched it with my thumb. Or if her mouth would feel as hot as it did when she bit me.

Perhaps it was the kill that got to me. I don't usually get a rush from killing, and I don't usually kill in anger, either. A good assassin can never be moved by any kind of emotion. But I can't deny that I was angry that Angelo Moretti had his hands on my target, a target I hadn't even gotten the information I needed from yet. I wasn't going to let him fuck that up, so I took my knife and dealt with him.

Lazarus won't be pleased that I went against his orders, but I don't care. We can deal with any Moretti blowback. It won't affect our eventual plan,

and besides, Astrid's far more valuable to us than he was.

She tenses as my mouth covers hers, but she doesn't move, so I don't, either. Her lips are as soft as I remember, and her body is very warm, the skin of her cheek smooth as satin against my fingertips. Instinctively, I grip her jaw to hold her where I want her, and she trembles, but I keep going, angling her head back so I can push my tongue into her mouth.

I never kiss and I never allow anyone to kiss me. It's too personal, too intimate, but her mouth is irresistible, and now I can't stop, especially when a gasp escapes her. It goes straight to my head like bubbles in champagne, sweet and effervescent, and I'm kissing her deeper now. Her mouth tastes like summer, hot and delicious, and she's soft, so fucking soft. And I'm pushing her against her little yellow car, feeling her body giving against mine, her tits against my chest, the heat of her pussy against the fly of my jeans.

It's been a long time since I've felt a kick of lust like this one, a *very* long time, and it's a mystery to me why my cock has decided this woman is the one, a twenty-one-year-old college student, a normal girl in a normal little life.

Then again, she's not quite as normal as she seems, is she? She's got a secret that she doesn't want anyone to know, and it's a dark one for a good girl like her. A dark one that calls to me.

I grip her tighter, pull her head back further so I can get deeper, exploring her mouth, tasting her. I nip at her bottom lip, demanding a response, and she trembles. Her hands are on my chest, her palms pressed to the cotton of the hoodie I wear beneath my leather jacket, and she tries to turn her head away. I don't let her, because I'm not done. I want more of this taste: honey and strawberries and every sweet thing I was never allowed in Enzo's house. Like the chocolate bar that Lazarus always had in his pocket, which he gave me every day after school.

"Lucien," she gasps out against my mouth. "Stop."

I don't want to. I want to keep going. And I don't think she wants me to stop, either, because she's not fighting me. She's not pushing me away. No, it's the opposite. Her fingers are curling in the cotton of my hoodie and she's melting against me as she trembles, but it's not with fear. In fact, I can't smell fear on her at all, and believe me, I'm familiar with its stink. No, the scent coming off her is that lavender and a delicate musk that rouses everything male in me.

I kiss her harder, challenging her to respond, because I want it, I demand it, and she does, tentatively touching her tongue to mine. And something triggers inside me, a lick of desire welling up so intense and dark, that I press my fingers hard against her jaw, holding on tight as I sink my teeth into her bottom lip.

She gasps and abruptly stops clinging, shoving me instead. "*Lucien.*"

There's panic in her voice so I lift my head, gripping her as I look down into her eyes. They've gone black in the night, her mouth as red as the bloody fingerprints I've left on her skin. She's breathing very fast, panting almost.

I want to fuck her, but she's a target and you don't fuck a target. There's too much risk involved. So, it should be easy to step back and let her go, since I'm not a man led around by his cock. Yet it's not easy, and I don't want to let her go. I want to keep kissing her, fuck her up against her car, right now, right here.

With the body of Angelo Moretti bleeding out on the ground?

The thought is a cold thread, cutting through the heat pumping through my veins, a reminder of where I am and what just happened. A reminder I shouldn't need, for fuck's sake.

I'm always aware of my surroundings, and I can't afford to lose that awareness, not even for a second. Yet someone could have crept up on me while I was kissing Astrid and I wouldn't have realised it until it was too late.

Christ. What am I doing?

I'm here for a reason, and that reason is to get information from her. I gave her two days to ask her father about the Hellhounds, and that time is up. She didn't talk to him, though, and I know because I've been watching her. She's been burying herself in her studies instead, as if my threat to tell the chief about her dark little secret meant nothing to her. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe I'll have to use something else as leverage. Then again, I've also been monitoring her texts and I know she's seeing her enforcer friend tonight, so perhaps she's going to talk to him about it instead.

"Why did you do that?" Astrid asks, her voice hoarse. "Why did you kiss me?"

"Because I wanted to." I ignore the flick of reluctance that catches me as I let her go and step back. "Have you got the information I wanted?"

She straightens but doesn't step away from the car. It's as if she needs it at her back to keep her upright and that makes the heat in my veins burn hotter. My kiss did that to her, made her legs weak. Of course, it might also have something to do with the dead body on the ground at her feet, but I choose to ignore that for now.

She takes a ragged breath. "Not yet. I'm going to talk to Wolf tonight."

"I gave you two days, Tinkerbell."

"Don't ... don't call me that." She shoves away from the car, already pulling herself together, putting steel in her spine and a stubborn cast to the angle of her jaw. She's got guts, this woman. I slit a man's throat in front of her, then kissed her, got his blood on her face, and she's already scowling at me as if none of it ever happened. "I'm not a goddamn fairy."

Really, right now, she doesn't look like one, either. There's a red streak across her cheekbone from where I stroked her with blood on my thumb, and a few red prints on her jaw and the side of her neck. If I squint, I can see the fading edges of the bruises on her throat, too.

My marks on her.

I step closer again and this time it's instinct, I can't stop it, and I take her chin in my hand, turning her head so I can see the bloody fingerprints I left on her. She doesn't resist this time, looking up at me, angry sparks glittering in her eyes. "Are you going to assault me again?"

I study her. Does she know that sounds like a challenge? Did she mean it that way? Because it wasn't an assault. She didn't pull away, no, she stood there and let me kiss her.

"An assault?" I echo. "Is that why you curled your fingers into my hoodie and kissed me back?"

Her jaw firms. "It was shock."

"Shock," I repeat. "You were so shocked that you kissed me back."

"Let me go."

"Why? You liked it."

"No, I didn't."

I search her face and despite myself, amusement tugs at me, the same amusement I felt in the alley, when she bit my thumb. Because she's lying and we both know it, and her refusal to admit that she liked that kiss is almost ... sweet.

"Liar." I trace that red mark across her cheekbone with my thumb. "You shouldn't play these little games with me, Astrid. You might end up getting more than you bargained for."

"I'm not playing games." She jerks her head away. "If you want me to get you information, you'll have to let me go."

She's not wrong. Despite all my assurances to myself, I'm letting my cock do my thinking for me, and that needs to stop. I'll have to deal with that at some point, but not now. Not when I have some serious clean-up to do.

I let her go and step away, glancing down at the mess on the concrete. Her glasses are lying there, as are her car keys, so I pick them both up. The

lenses of her glasses are smeared with blood, so I wipe them on my hoodie, then hold them out to her.

She doesn't even glance down, merely staring at me, her face bone-white.

"Go on." I make my voice hard to cut through her shock. "Take your glasses and keys and go meet your friend."

"Why did you kill him?"

"Like I said, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time." I ignore the way something in me is whispering that slitting his throat was about more than simply protecting my source of intel. That there was a deeper reason, an emotional reason. A reason that has something to do with her.

"He attacked me. I told you, he wanted me to take him to Dad."

Unfortunate that I didn't get to Moretti before he spoke to her, but him targeting her instead of the club wasn't something I'd anticipated. And if what she says is true, and he demanded to see the chief, it means that the Morettis are here for the weapons operation.

She's not just your target now.

Something dark and hot in me, something I buried a long, long time ago, something that stirred when I saw Angelo Moretti shove Astrid against the car, growls low and deep. But I shove it back down in the dirt where I buried it.

My attraction to her is purely physical, nothing more, and I won't let it compromise this mission. All I want from her is information, and I will get it before anyone else does.

"Go home." I take her hand, slap the keys and glasses into her palm. "Talk to your friend. I want that information, and I want it tonight."

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Chapter Thirteen

ASTRID

No matter how high I blast Matilda's heater, I can't get warm as I drive back home, my hands shaking as I grip the steering wheel.

What happened in the parking lot keeps replaying in my head over and over, but it's not the man getting his throat slit that I'm thinking about. No, all I can think about is Lucien gripping my jaw, his fingers pressing hard against my skin and his mouth coming down on mine. His tongue exploring me, tasting me, demanding things from me that I didn't know how to give. His body pressing me against the car, my breasts mashed against his chest, and how hot and hard he felt. How he tasted like dark chocolate and whisky and sin. How he bit my bottom lip and it hurt, but the pain was so good, so bright and sharp, and there was a throbbing heat between my legs, and—

God. A man was murdered in front of me and all I can think about is a kiss. My first real kiss given to me by a beautiful killer with bloodstained hands, who I don't know the first thing about apart from his name. Who picked my glasses up out of the blood, cleaned them then gave them back to me.

I liked it. The pain and the pleasure, and I wanted more. How fucked up is that?

I swallow, trying to pay attention to the road ahead of me.

Lucien said he would “deal” with the man, whoever he is, and I assume that means he’ll clean up the blood and get rid of the body. Get rid of the evidence. Does that make me an accessory? That I just drove away when he told me to? Should I pull over right now, call the police, tell them I have a murder to report?

Except ... that guy wanted me to take him to Dad. Why? What did he want with Dad? Why did he attack me? Does it relate to what Lucien told me about Dad and the Hellhounds and the weapons? Are they all related in some way?

No, I can’t call the police, not yet. As the chief, Dad would be involved, and I don’t want to involve him until I know what’s going on. Hopefully, Wolf will be able to tell me. Hopefully none of this will be about Dad at all.

My thoughts tangle as I drive, and when I finally get home, I have to sit in the car for a little while, because between being attacked, witnessing a murder, and Lucien’s kiss, I’m a wreck. Also, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror, I’m slightly horrified to realise I still have blood on my face from where Lucien touched me. Grimacing, I find a rag in the glove box and use it to wipe the blood away, so at least I don’t have that to worry about.

I have to pull myself together, though. Wolf’s Harley is parked out front already, and Lucien was very clear he wants the information tonight, so I’ve got no choice but to get it out of Wolf now.

I don’t have to have this conversation. I could let Lucien make good on his threat to tell Dad about my cutting. It would be horrible, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world if he knew. Then again, what if Lucien then escalated things? He might threaten Rowan or Wolf, or even Dad, in order to get me to do what he wants, and I can’t let that happen. I can’t allow them to be used by Lucien just because they happened to know me.

So, no. I’ll get him the information tonight, and then all this will end.

Steeling myself, I get out of the car and into the cold night and head up the steps to the front door. Once I'm inside, I take off my coat and hang it on the hook in the hall, then take a steadying breath, and go into the living room.

Wolf is in jeans, a T-shirt and his cut, lounging on one of the armchairs by the window while my father is in his usual ugly-as-hell recliner. Both of them have a beer in hand, and are talking, but the conversation breaks off as soon as I step into the room.

Wolf's handsome face lights up as he sees me, and he pushes himself out of his chair, coming over to give me his usual bear hug, and I can't help but tense up, already anxious about this conversation. And of course he picks up on it.

"Hey." He releases me, his dark brows drawing together in concern. "You okay?"

I force a smile. "Oh, I'm fine. Just ... tired. College, the usual stuff."

Dad is watching from his chair. I'm not the only one who's tired from the looks of things. There are dark circles under his eyes, and a grim cast to his mouth, which is nothing out of the ordinary for Dad. But given everything that's happened, I'm now wondering if his expression has something to do with the conversation he was just having with Wolf before I came in.

"Hey, Dad," I say, forcing my smile wider.

He nods and gives one of his usual grunts of acknowledgement, then pushes himself out of his chair. "Going to bed," he says. "I'll leave you kids to talk."

It's too early for bed, but I don't say anything as he leaves the room. He can't be here while I have this conversation anyway.

Wolf is still frowning at me, and I hope I haven't missed a spot of blood. But he only says, "Sit. I'll get you some hot tea."

I'm in no mood to argue. I'm cold and my legs still feel weak, and sitting down with a cup of hot tea sounds like bliss. So I let him make me tea and a few minutes later, I'm on the couch, my mug steaming on the coffee table in front of me, while I try to figure out how to broach the topic of his club.

He settles himself in the armchair nearby and before I can say a word, he asks, "What's with the lie about being tired?" His dark eyes are very direct. "Something's fucking happened, and don't bother denying it, Addie. I know you, remember?"

I swallow. That's old friends for you. They know when you're talking shit, but at least he's given me an idea about how to approach this subject. The best lie is as close to the truth as you can manage, right?

"Yeah, okay." I lean forward and pick up my mug. The tea is peppermint, fresh and clean-tasting, and it settles the sick feeling in my stomach. "Uh ... well ... I heard a rumour today. About the club."

Wolf's eyes narrow. "A rumour? What rumour?"

I take another sip of tea to moisten my dry mouth. "Someone said that the club controls a gun-running operation at the port or something. And that Dad just lets it happen."

"Uh-huh. And who told you that?" The question is casual almost, as if he's heard that rumour a thousand times before, yet there's tension in his voice.

I remember asking Wolf about his father once, after we reconnected in high school, and he went tense like this. He didn't want to talk about his home life, not the way he used to when we were little, and I know he doesn't want to talk about this, either. My stomach drops away.

"It's true, isn't it?" I ignore his question, the sick feeling in my gut getting worse.

He lets out a breath, his dark eyes softening slightly. "You know I can't talk about club business with you, Addie."

No, I know he can't. When he dropped out of high school to become a club prospect, I tried to have a talk with him about it, tried to tell him that dropping out of high school was a really bad idea, etc. He only smiled at me like he knew something I didn't and told me the club was the family he'd never had, and that's all he was going to say about it. So, that's how I left it.

But I'm cold now and getting colder. "Tell me." My voice is sharper than I intended. "You're my friend and Dad is the chief of police, and I want to know if you're both breaking the law."

Wolf leans back in the armchair, his long, powerful legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankle. He's aiming for completely relaxed, but I know he's not. There's still tension in his shoulders, and his mouth has thinned. "There's always hundreds of fucking rumours about the club flying around. Why are you getting your panties in a twist about this one?"

He's not wrong, there have always been rumours about the club. That they run strings of prostitutes, deal drugs with the Mexican cartels, kidnap kids to become prospects, the works. I've never believed any of them, because I thought that if any of them were true, then Dad would have rounded up all the members of the club and put them in jail.

But maybe I've been naïve. Maybe that's what I wanted to believe, because I couldn't stand the thought of my friend and my father being involved in anything shady.

"Because it involves Dad," I say. "I don't want people saying he isn't doing his job properly." I take another sip of tea, my icy fingers curled around the porcelain. "And I'm worried for you."

Wolf gazes at me for a long moment, then he shifts, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. "Look, don't worry about me," he says easily. "I'm fine. It's all good. And Elias does a great job. Everyone in town knows it."

"So, how do you make your money, then?" I can't let this go. "Harleys are expensive."

“We’ve got the workshop.” He means the car and motorbike repair shop that he works at and is run by the club. “It makes good money.”

“Enough to keep you in beer and women and expensive bikes?”

“Addie.” His tone is a soft warning. “We don’t discuss club business with civilians. I told you that. And you’re a civilian.”

“So is Dad, but you discuss it with him.” The words come out before I can stop them.

Wolf says nothing, just looks at me.

“Oh, come on,” I insist. “You both go silent whenever I walk into the room, then one of you changes the subject.”

An expression I can’t read crosses his face, then it’s gone, his features hardening. “Who is telling you this bullshit? Where did you hear it?”

Lucien. Lucien Frost. Do you know him? Does he have anything to do with your club? Do you know that he saved me from an attack tonight then he kissed me and now I can’t stop thinking about it?

The memory of that kiss stings my mouth; I can still feel the slight throb from where he nipped me. It makes me go hot all over. I should tell Wolf about Lucien and what he did, and what he wants from me, but the words stay trapped in my throat.

I don’t want to explain about Lucien, because then questions will be asked. About why I didn’t tell anyone about him choking me on the beach, or threatening me in the alley, or kissing me in the parking lot. About why I watched him kill a man *then* let him kiss me.

But those are practical reasons. There’s also the part of me that doesn’t want anyone to know about him, that wants to keep him a secret. A dark secret. And once people know about him, he won’t be my secret anymore.

“Someone at college. It was in a group chat.” I drain the rest of my tea, put the cup down and stare at him. “Please, Connor. Just tell me if it’s true or not.” I use his given name deliberately, reminding him of our friendship

and what we once were to each other, when we were little kids and he used to protect me from the bullies in the yard.

His gaze flickers. “Sorry, Addie,” he says. “The club always comes first.” He sounds genuinely regretful about it, but also firm.

“So, if this was life or death,” I keep on, knowing he won’t tell me, but hammering away all the same. “You’d say the same thing? You’d put the club before me?”

His expression shuts down then, like a door slamming in my face. “I swore an oath to the club, to my brothers. So, yes. The club comes before everything else, including you.”

I shouldn’t have pushed him. I shouldn’t have kept insisting, because now I know exactly how important I am to him. Not as important as his goddamn club, and it ... hurts.

You’re not important to your father, either. So, who are you important to?

The thought is barbed, hooks sinking into me and catching on my skin, while the balloon in my chest inflates and inflates, pressing against my ribs and my heart, and my lungs.

When I was a little kid, I never questioned Dad’s love. He never said it to me, but I knew because of the way he took care of me. It was only as I grew up and he began drawing away from me that I started to question. I thought maybe it was because I had a hot temper, so I tried not to get angry. I tried not to throw tantrums or be rebellious. I became a model student.

Yet that didn’t fix things. He hardly talks to me now, doesn’t like looking at me. Doesn’t seem to give a shit what I do, so really, how important am I to him? And do I count Rowan? She’s my friend, and we hang out, but she’d get along just fine without me.

What about Lucien?

Him? He’s a killer. A psychopath who just happened to kiss me. I’m not important to him. He wants the information I can get him, nothing more,

though it's looking as if I can't get that, either.

I want to keep insisting, plead even, but there's no point. Wolf isn't going to budge and trying to make him will only alert his suspicions. His loyalty is to his club, and I have to let it go.

At least I know that now, though. At least I know where I stand.

"Okay." I can't keep the hurt from my voice. "Then I guess we have nothing else to talk about."

His black brows draw down. "Fuck's sake. That doesn't mean I can't be your friend. Come on. It doesn't mean you're not important to me, either."

But I push myself off the couch. The weight of my fear and my loneliness is crushing, and it's hard to breathe. I need to let it out. It's a wound that needs to be drained.

"I'm tired," I say shortly. "Let's talk about it later."

"Addie—"

"Please, Wolf. I've got a lot of work to do tonight."

He doesn't want to go. He doesn't like where we've left things. But I don't have the energy to make things okay for him, not now, so I say nothing, and finally he gets to his feet. "Okay, fine, I'll go." He pauses beside me, concern replacing the hard look on his face, and lifts a large hand, cupping the side of my face in exactly the same way Lucien did earlier. "Get some sleep, huh? You look wrung out."

His concern feels like steel wool against a wound, though, and I pull away. "Thanks," I say quickly. "I will."

He leaves after that without a word. I don't even get a hug.

Chapter Fourteen

LUCIEN

I 'm sitting in my car on Astrid's street, watching her talk to her Hellhound friend on my camera. Took me a bit of time to clean up the blood and get rid of Moretti's carcass, but that's something you can't rush. Sloppiness will get you killed or put you in prison, and neither is an option for me.

But it meant I missed the beginning of their conversation. I only came in when she was asking him how the club made their money and he lied about his workshop. Astrid was getting desperate in the end, I could see, but the Hound was very clear about where his loyalties lie, and it's not with her.

I've done my research on him.

Connor Black. Road name Wolf. Hellhounds enforcer, who joined the MC as soon as he left school. Works in the club's motorbike repair business. He grew up with her, and they were inseparable until adolescence and Black's shitty home life got in the way.

I don't know what she thought about the club, but him laying out how the club comes before anyone and anything hurt her. I saw her expression flicker and her body get tight as if absorbing a blow. And I saw her rubbing at her chest, too, as if there was something painful there.

It's been a difficult night for a normal girl, and I'm not going to make it any less difficult. Her Hellhound friend didn't give her the information I need, and that's unfortunate. I'd already anticipated that he wouldn't, since club loyalties are like loyalties within the crime world. Family comes first, before everything. It's the reason for everything you do, and nothing is more important than your loyalty to it.

Still, I'd hoped his loyalties would be torn, and that she might be able to take advantage of that. Apparently not. He's a committed club member and he's not going to tell her anything.

I wasn't expecting him to cup her cheek, though, and all I could think was that he was putting his hand where mine had been earlier this evening. That he was touching her in the same way, and I knew that when I'd touched her like that, I'd kissed her. Strange how every muscle in my body tightened at the thought of the Hound's mouth on hers. How a hot, slow anger stirred, winding slowly through my blood, and how I wanted to cut that hand off so he'd never touch her again.

I shouldn't be getting so possessive with a target. I shouldn't be getting possessive at all. I never have before, so these feelings are foreign to me. Kissing her was a mistake and its complicated things.

You think it wasn't already complicated? You touched her mouth in the alley. You wanted to feel her softness.

I shove the voice in my head away. A momentary slip due to an unexpected physical attraction, that's all, nothing more. Besides, what's done is done, and I can't take it back now.

Lifting my gaze from the laptop, I watch as the Hellhound comes out of Astrid's house, gets on his Harley and roars up the street without looking back. Astrid goes upstairs to her bedroom.

Time to get what I came for.

I exit the car, lock it, and cross the street to Astrid's house. When I first set up my cameras, I had a key cut to make things easy, so I use it now to let

myself in.

It's dark and silent in the house, a clock ticking on the mantelpiece in the living area. I go quietly up the stairs, avoiding the risers that creak, then down the hallway to Astrid's room. She'll scream if I come in unannounced and I don't want her alerting the chief, so I stand to one side and knock on her door.

There's a moment of silence and then she says, "Dad? One second."

I hear her move, then the door opens, and I step silently out of the shadows, grabbing her around the waist and putting one hand over her mouth, before dragging her back into her bedroom as her scream vibrates against my palm.

She struggles as I hold on to her while pushing back against the door to shut it, so I say in her ear. "Relax, Tinkerbell. It's me."

She freezes.

"Are you going to scream?"

She shakes her head, silvery curls flowing against my chest and over my arm. Her body is very warm, and very soft, and unexpectedly the taste of her floods my mouth. Sweet, hot. Delicious. But I didn't come here for that, so I ignore the pulse of heat that grips me, release her and step back.

I've been in her room before, when I set up my cameras, so I'm familiar with it. She likes pretty things and frills – and cats, apparently, since a whole collection of cats made of glass and metal, and wood sits on her bookcases. A pink scarf covers the bedside light on her nightstand, flooding the room with a soft pink light.

She's dressed for bed in flannel pyjamas with kittens all over them, her hair loose down her back, and she hasn't got her glasses on. In the pink light she looks insubstantial, ethereal, like a dandelion, the first breath of wind blowing her away. Vulnerable, that's what she is. Vulnerable and unprotected.

Astrid seems oblivious to this, though. She's breathing fast and those angry sparks are glittering in her eyes. Her delicate jaw is tight, and her fingers have curled into fists, her shoulders square.

Her stance is one of a boxer ready to fight, and again, a flicker of strange amusement goes through me. Does she think she can go up against me? I killed my first man at fifteen, and I did it with my bare hands. She's no match for me, none at all.

"I didn't get it," she says before I can speak, throwing the words at me like stones. "Wolf wouldn't tell me. Apparently, the club comes first."

"That's a shame." I lean back against the door and fold my arms, making it very clear that if she wants to get out, she'll have to go through me. "Why haven't you gone to your father? I gave you two days. Plenty of time for a conversation."

Her chin juts belligerently. "You think he'll tell me anything? He barely speaks to me as it is."

Interesting. While I was conducting my surveillance, I did notice that there was very little interaction between her and her father. Their conversations were minimal and about nothing of any importance, and certainly not about the subjects I was interested in.

"Why not?" I ask, curious.

"You should ask him," she says.

"Maybe I should. Maybe I'll go into his room right now and get the information I want." I hold her gaze. "Start cutting pieces off you. Do you think he might tell me then?"

She should be afraid. It's not a bluff and nothing I haven't done before. Lazarus, of course, would be unhappy with the attention that would draw, but I wouldn't kill her. I'd keep her alive to ensure the chief's silence.

It's what I should have done in the first place, but Enzo wanted me to follow Lazarus's orders, and his orders were to stay under the radar.

Astrid, though, is not afraid. She's furious. Her whole body is singing with tension like a bow string drawn too tight. "He wouldn't tell you," she says flatly. "He doesn't give a shit no matter how many pieces you cut off."

"Care to test that theory?"

"Sure." Quite suddenly she closes the distance between us until we're toe-to-toe; me against the door, her in front of me, staring up at me. The top of her head barely reaches my shoulder. "You can start cutting me now. I could use some pain."

Her cheeks are flushed and there's a fierce look in her eyes. So much emotion and so close to the surface, and she doesn't seem to care that I can see it. That I could use it against her if I wanted, use it to manipulate her. I'm doing that already, yet she's still blazing at me, showing her temper.

Pain. Why does she need it? Is this how she deals with all that fire inside her? She uses a knife to let it all out and the pain washes her clean? And why am I interested? Why do I even care?

A thin thread of anger laces through me, and even though it's more at myself than at her, I move, reaching out to wrap my fingers around her throat. Then I turn and shove her up against her bedroom door. "You think I won't do it?" I murmur. "You think you're safe?"

She stares back, meeting my gaze head-on. "Do it, then. The anticipation is killing me."

Fuck, she's pushing me, and I'm not sure why. She knows what I'm capable of, what I could do to her if I wanted to. I showed her tonight in the parking lot.

"Do you want to find my line?" I step even closer, crowding her against the door. "Is that what you want?" I lean in, my mouth against her ear, breathing in her scent. "You want to push me until I break?" She shivers, her breath panting, but she doesn't move. "I won't break, Tinkerbell." I brush my mouth against the shell of her ear and feel her tremble. "But you might."

“Go on,” she says huskily. “Break me. I’ve got nothing left to lose.”

I lift my head and look down into her flushed face, and there’s still no fear there, only anger. For a moment we stare at each other, the air around us thick with aggression and fury, and a seething tension that grabs me by the throat and won’t let go.

But it’s Astrid who moves first, rising suddenly on her toes before pressing her mouth against mine.

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Chapter Fifteen

ASTRID

I must be insane. I must be certifiable. Kissing the man who just threatened to cut pieces off me in front of my father. He'd do it, too, just like he slit that man's throat in front of me, with no doubts or hesitations.

But somehow, he's here in my house, in my bedroom, and he has me by the throat, and I'm tired.

I'm tired of being at the mercy of my fear. I'm tired of feeling like I have no choice. I'm tired of holding up a façade that's crumbling, no matter what I do to keep it in place. And I'm tired of him messing with my already complicated life, just because he can. Just because he's bigger and stronger, and more deadly than I am.

After Wolf left, the panic inside me was so intense I could hardly breathe, and all I wanted to do was to grab my knife and let it out, let the pain come. But then fucking Lucien appeared, demanding the information that I don't have, and that was the last straw.

I didn't care what he did to me. It couldn't be worse than the balloon in my chest that inflates and shifts around my insides, making it hard to breathe, hard to eat. Hard to even exist. So yes, I did push him. I wanted to. I wanted him to hurt me, so I didn't have to do it myself.

But he didn't move, just kept his hand around my throat, and I lost patience. He kissed me in the parking lot, sunk his teeth into my lip, so all I wanted was to pay him back in kind.

But I forgot how good he tastes, and how his fingers around my throat make me hot. And how I don't know anything about kissing. I just want to kiss him harder, so I push my tongue into his mouth, tasting the raw heat of him. He's delicious, rich and dark, and I shudder when he makes a rough sound in his throat, shoving me up against the door again and pinning me there. There's a moment where I think he might pull away, but he doesn't. Instead, his tongue meets mine, demanding, dominating, taking everything, leaving me with no choice but to surrender.

I make a desperate sound of my own, and he slides a thumb up the side of my throat, lifting my jaw, tilting my head back against the door to give him better access to my mouth. It's a wild storm, this kiss. A hurricane. And there's only two things you can do in a hurricane. You either run from it or you become one with it.

I want to touch him, so I lift a hand as he kisses me deeper, harder, and I reach for his throat the way he's holding mine, slipping my fingers around the strong column on his neck. His skin is hot, pulse beating against my palm the way mine is beating against his. I'm not a threat to him. There's no way I can choke a grown man with one hand, but I feel the sudden tension that goes through him at my touch.

He lifts his head, leaving me panting and trembling, staring down at me, and a strange satisfaction fills me. Because there's nothing cold or empty about his eyes now. There's no ice there at all. They blaze with a flame so intense that steals the remaining breath from my lungs. All I can think is, yes, I did that to him. I put the heat in his eyes. That was *all* me.

"You're going to choke me, Tinkerbelle?" His voice is a rough growl. "You want to turn the tables?"

I don't look away, my breathing getting faster and faster. "Why not? You might like it."

His attention drifts to my mouth and back up again, as if he can't help himself, and his hand around my throat is heavy. His fingers flex, pressing against my skin and as I shudder in reaction, his gaze flares even hotter.

He likes this, I realise suddenly. He likes holding me like this, kissing me like this. He might be colder than ice, but right now he feels anything but.

He wants me.

"I warned you not to play little games," he says. "You might not like the consequences."

This time it's my turn to press my fingers against his skin. It's kind of pathetic because my hand is small and I'm not as strong as he is, but again there's a flare of reaction in his eyes as I do it. He's not immune, oh no, he's not.

The discovery is a head rush, filling me with a sense of power, and it's intoxicating. This icy, controlled killer wants me, and it's making me feel reckless, like I'm back on that rollercoaster again. But this time I don't care if I get thrown. Everything's falling apart around me so why not be part of the chaos?

"What consequences?" I demand breathlessly. "You might choke me? Oh, wait."

One side of his mouth twists. "There are worse things than a little light choking."

"Pain, maybe?" I give him a fierce smile to match his own. "Cut pieces off me, then, see if I care. I like pain, if you hadn't already guessed."

He makes a savage sound in the back of his throat, his gaze dropping once again to my mouth, before looking back up again. "I can do that. I can also fuck you up against this door first, then tell the chief I desecrated his virgin daughter as I cut off your fingers one by one."

The recklessness inside me is building, along with a wild heat that's making me feel drunk, because something inside me is whispering that, yes, he could fuck me up against this door. He'd do it hard, too, and it perhaps it would hurt, and the pain would be so good. Much better than a knife.

"Joke's on you," I say huskily. "I'm not a virgin."

"I see." He strokes the side of my neck with his thumb. "So, you've been fucked before, then, have you?"

Beneath the masculine spice of his scent, I can smell rain and a damp earthiness that makes me think of dark forests and wild things, creatures untamed and deadly. He is one of those creatures, sleek and predatory and beautiful. Designed to attract, then once you've fallen into his trap, he'll kill you.

He's so close, and I have to put my head back far to look up at him. It's strange to look a psychopath full in the face and feel like you might die if he doesn't kiss you again.

"Of course I have," I lie, my voice hoarse. "I've been fucked hundreds of times."

He shakes his head. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing, using sex to distract me. But I'll take it. And afterwards, I'll still make you give me the information I need."

I'm sure he will. But I'm drunk on my own power now, and I don't want to stop. For so long, I've been driven by the need to be good, to do well, to make my father regret my mother's death less somehow. To make myself matter to people. But Lucien doesn't care how good I am or how well I'm doing. I don't matter to him, and somehow that feels liberating. I don't have to be someone I'm not with him. I don't have to keep that façade in place. I can be whoever I want, and it won't make any difference to him.

"You can certainly try," I say.

Unexpectedly, he laughs, a soft rumble that strokes down my spine, making me shiver all over, then he shifts, pulling out of my grip. Keeping

his own fingers wrapped firmly around my throat, he leans down, draws the knife from his boot and straightens.

If I was a normal girl, I'd be terrified, but I'm not a normal girl. I'm fucked up, and the knife doesn't scare me. No, I love knives, don't I?

"Did you cut yourself tonight, Astrid?" Lucien asks, his voice a dark purr.

"No." I watch him as he lifts the blade.

"Did you want to?"

"Yes."

He looks at me like he can see into my head, see all the dark places in my soul. See the part of me that's afraid I'll never be good enough to make my mother's sacrifice worth it.

"Why is that?" He shifts his hold on my throat and runs the tip of the knife down to the first button of my pyjama top. "What makes a good little girl like you put a blade against her own skin?"

I've never told anyone about my little cutting secret. Not a single person. Yet this complete stranger is asking me questions and all I want to do is answer him. It won't matter if he knows. It won't matter at all.

"I got a B plus instead of an A," I say, the words pouring out of me. "And I can't get a B plus, not if I want to get into med school. So, I had to redo the assignment, and I don't have time. I don't have time for any of this."

His gaze pins me to the door, the knife flicking as he cuts off the first button of my pyjama top. I tremble as the fabric parts, goosebumps prickling everywhere.

"A high achiever, hmm?" He trails the tip of the knife over my skin, cold and sharp, down to the next button. "You've got something to prove?"

Heat moves through me, my nipples hardening, a slickness between my legs. The relief of being able to say these things to him is dizzying. "My mother got cancer while she was pregnant with me, and instead of

terminating the pregnancy, she had me. Afterwards, it ended up being too late to treat her and she died.” I take another heaving breath as he slips the blade beneath the threads holding the button on. “She died because she chose to have me instead.”

Lucien pauses for a second, stares down at me, his gaze burning, then he cuts the next button off. “You don’t think you’re good enough.” He moves the knife down to the next button. “You don’t think your mother’s sacrifice was worth it.”

“I’m trying to make it worth it,” I say fiercely. “She was brilliant and wanted to be a doctor. She was training to be one when I was born, and that’s why I have to get into med school. I’m trying to fix things. I have to do what she wasn’t able to.”

His gaze roams over my face as he cuts the next button and then the next, until my pyjama top is hanging open. “Pain is your punishment, then.” I shiver as he runs the tip of the knife down over my bare flesh, between my breasts and down to the waistband of my pyjama bottoms. “Your punishment for being born.”

To my horror, tears prickle at the back of my eyes and my throat feels tight. Is it punishment? Is that what I’m really doing when I cut? Hurting myself because my mother gave herself a death sentence when she had me?

Whatever it is, I don’t want to cry. It’s not supposed to go this way. It’s not supposed to be me on the verge of tears, spilling my guts to a predator.

I turn my head away, but Lucien grips my jaw and forces my gaze back to his. “I can give you punishment, Tinkerbelle. I can make it hurt.”

I swallow, blinking fiercely, trying to force the tears away. “Why would you want to?” I demand, furious with myself. “Because you feel sorry for me?”

“To feel sorry for you, I’d have to care, and I don’t. Get that straight right now.” His fingers press against my jawbone. “But I’ve got some time and a knife, and you want me to fuck you. So why don’t I do both?”

Chapter Sixteen

LUCIEN

I mean it. I want to fuck her. I shouldn't, but I do. And why not?

She wants me, I can see it in her eyes. They're dark, full of pain and rage, and arousal, and it's such a beautiful combination. She keeps pushing and pushing and pushing, as if she doesn't know what I'm capable of and doesn't care anyway, and there's a part of me that almost admires that.

The things I've done would horrify her. My threat to cut pieces off her, well, I've done it before. Dealing out Enzo's justice isn't for the faint of heart. He had an underling, once, who was doing a deal for him and thought Enzo wouldn't miss a little cash. Enzo did miss it. So I sent pieces of him back to his wife as a warning, and that's just one example.

She shouldn't push me, but she did, and it's clear to me why. She wants the pain. She wants the hurt. She wants some relief from the pressure inside her, that makes her desperate for that A plus and that med school acceptance. That makes her desperate to make herself worth her mother's death.

I don't know why she told me those things. I asked the questions, because I was curious and it seemed a good a time as any to get more information about her. It's always good to find more leverage. But she

shouldn't have given me the truth, because I'm not a man you want to entrust all your secret fears to. They become weapons in my hands. Everything becomes a weapon in my hands.

Does she know what she's done? What she's handed me? It's not because she trusts me, so perhaps it's more a confession. I'm her priest, the faceless stranger she can talk to who'll deliver punishment and grant absolution.

Three Hail Marys, two Our Fathers, and one fuck against her bedroom door.

In the soft pink light, her pyjama top hangs open, revealing skin like mother-of-pearl, and she's breathing fast, hard. Desperate. Her gaze is pinned to mine, my fingers against her jaw.

I want her, but I don't fuck normal women. Only, occasionally, the groupies in Enzo's house. I tell them what I want and they do it, and that's all. It's impersonal, but it's clean. No messy emotional attachments involved. Everyone knows what they're getting out of it.

But this woman is staring at me like she's desperate for something only I can give her, and she's the epitome of normal, no matter that she cuts herself at night. She has feelings, emotions, and they're all so close to the surface. She spilled her guts to me, she made it personal, and I can't afford to get involved in personal.

Especially not considering she's a virgin. I mean, it was obvious she'd never been touched before the moment I put my hand around her throat on the beach. The kiss I gave her in the parking lot earlier, too, confirmed it. She didn't know what she was doing – I had to show her. So she's lying when she says she's been fucked hundreds of times, lying through her teeth.

I should be dragging her into her father's bedroom and making good on my threat to use her to get the information I need. Then afterwards, if I'm still hard, I'll let my own goddamn hand give me a release. I don't need her.

Yet ... the way she's looking at me makes the blood in my veins pump hard. None of the women in Enzo's house look at me that way, none of them. They're there for the money, that's all, and they have certainly never poured out their soul to me as if I'm someone they trust.

She touched me. She put her small hand around my throat, and no one touches me like that, either. No one touches me at all. But she did, this virgin girl, and it's me she wants. Me she's looking at with desperation in her eyes. Me, the killer who slit a man's throat in front of her.

Yes, I want her, and like I told her, I have time and a knife, and I can give her what she wants. I can give her pain, fuck her like she wants me to, but also take a little something for myself. It's been a long time since I've had something I wanted, because I try not to want anything at all except the freedom I'm owed. But she's gotten under my skin, and there's only one way to deal with that.

She searches my face as if she's looking for something, but if it's softness or tenderness, she won't find it. Though, that's not what she wants, is it?

"Yes," she says. "Please, Lucien."

The way she says my name, all husky and edged with desperation, sends an electric shock straight down my spine. I like her begging me. I like hearing how badly she wants me.

I lean in, nuzzling at the side of her neck, inhaling the scent of her arousal. "How badly do you want me to fuck you?"

She shudders, tilting her head to the side the way she did in the alley. "Badly," she whispers.

"Beg me, then." I set my teeth against the chords of her neck and nip her. "Beg me to fuck you."

A gasp escapes her, and she lifts a hand, grabbing a handful of my hoodie. "Please, please," she says thickly. "Please, fuck me, Lucien."

The way she grabs me and the hunger in her voice wraps around my own throat and squeezes tight. This is a mistake, and I know it, but this is the first time a woman has ever actually wanted me. The first time anyone has ever begged for me – so yes, I’ll take her. I’ll give her the pain she’s desperate for and my cock along with it, and I’ll look into her eyes as I make her come. I’ll make her see fucking God.

I sheath my knife, pull her hand from my hoodie. Then I jerk her pyjama top down her shoulders, exposing her pretty tits. The breath goes out of her, and her hands half come up to shield herself instinctively, but they’re trapped by the fabric and she can’t. So, I take my time looking at her. Her breasts are full and round, little pink nipples already hard, and so touchable that I trail the backs of my fingers over the curve of her breast.

She flushes, rose staining her cheeks and neck. Her skin is warm and smooth as silk, and I’m indulging myself shamelessly now. I cup her breast, squeezing her, weighing the softness in my palm, and she shudders. Her mouth opens on a sigh and her back arches. She’s like a cat being stroked and wanting more.

I thread my fingers through her hair then close them into a fist, holding on to the soft, silky strands. Then I slide my hand down beneath the waistband of her pyjama pants, over the shivering plane of her stomach, to the soft, damp curls between her thighs.

Another low gasp escapes her, and her eyes go even wider as I slide a finger through her wet flesh to find her hard little clit. “Oh...” she breathes softly, as I circle it, teasing it. “Oh my God...”

This is the first time she’s been touched like this. I’m the first man to stroke her clit, make her wet. The first man to kiss her.

Virginity has never interested me before, but now it’s in my head that I’m her first and I can’t get rid of the satisfaction of it. It feels as if there’s a beast inside me, woken up from a long hibernation, and it’s hungry. It’s

possessive and finds the thought of being her first absolutely intoxicating. Better than heroin.

You've never had anything that was just yours and yours alone.

No. No I fucking haven't.

I sift those wet curls through my fingers, tugging on them, making her shake. "No one's touched you here, have they?" I grip her hair keeping her still while my fingers explore. "I'm the first man to touch this little pussy, aren't I?"

"N-No, you're not," she stutters, panting.

I lean in again, nuzzling at the other side of her neck, brushing my mouth along her jaw. "You keep lying to me like this and you won't get what you want."

She takes more ragged breaths as my fingers slip and slide on her wet flesh, teasing her clit, before circling the entrance of her pussy. "O-Okay, okay ... yes," she whispers shakily. "You're the f-first."

I shouldn't feel so satisfied, I shouldn't. But the beast inside me growls and it's pleased. It likes the thought that she's never had this kind of pleasure before, and I'm the one giving it to her.

I sink a finger into her tight wet pussy, and her head goes back against her bedroom door, her small white teeth sinking into her bottom lip. She's so tight and she smells so sweet, and even though something at the back of my brain is telling me this is a fucking bad idea, I don't stop.

I can't stop. I ease a second finger into her slippery cunt, testing her. She draws a breath in sharply, her back arching again, so I slide it in deeper, and she groans. I can't stop looking at her face, at how flushed she is, and how into what I'm doing to her she is. I've never watched a woman come before, I've never been interested enough to bother. Giving pleasure has never been the goal for me during sex, only my own release, but it's different with her. There's something erotic about knowing I'm the one

making her shake, making her moan, making her beg, and I can't tear my gaze away.

“Lucien...” she breathes, her eyes half-shut. “Oh, please ... I need...”

“Pain,” I murmur in her ear. “You need pain.”

She sighs. “Please...”

And that's when I break.

That's when I can't wait any more.

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Chapter Seventeen

ASTRID

I can barely keep myself upright. I can barely think. His tattooed fingers are inside me, stretching me, and it feels so good. His big, hard body presses me against the door, and I can smell his scent. His blue gaze blazes down into mine as if he's never seen anything so fascinating.

I've never had anyone look at me that way before, and it's so erotic. Everything about this is erotic. Something in my head is whispering that it's wrong to let a murderer touch me with the same hands he killed with, that's it's fucked up. And yes, it is. But maybe that's why I like it so much. Maybe there's a little piece of darkness in me that somehow matches the darkness in him.

Then again, he's *all* darkness. He's all cold beauty and violence, yet he's stroking me, his mouth brushing against my neck, lightly, almost delicately. And those fingers that did that violence, are now sliding in and out of me, making my thighs shake and my breath pant as pleasure spreads a dark spider's web through me.

I want more. I want harder. I want the pain he's offering. The pain would add an edge, make things sharper and more intense, but he's pulling his fingers out of me, and I haven't gotten what I wanted yet.

“No,” I breathe, opening my eyes and looking up at him. “Don’t stop.”

He lifts his hand, my wetness glistening on his fingers, then he licks his fingers, watching me all the while. “You taste good,” he says, deep and rough. “And who said anything about stopping?”

Abruptly, he picks me up, carrying me over to my bed and dumping me down on the mattress. I try to sit up, but he pushes me onto my back, before grabbing the waistband of my pyjama bottoms and jerking them down and off. Then he leans over me, his big body stretching over mine, and looks down, his gaze scanning every inch of me. The lines of his face are taut and hungry, and another rush of power fills me.

He wants me. He wants me badly.

Slowly, I let my knees fall open, full of a courage I never knew I had. “So?” I ask. “You promised me both. Pain and a fuck.”

A muscle leaps in his jaw and his eyes glitter as he stares at my pussy. “I’ll fuck you when I’m good and ready, Tinkerbelle.”

I tremble, then his gaze narrows as he stares at my thighs, and for one brief second, I wonder what’s so interesting about them, then I remember the cuts I put there earlier, after the study hall, and the lines of the other scars that are there as well.

I try to sit up again, putting my hands down over the cuts to hide them, even though he’s already seen them. Even though he already knows that I cut myself, and why. But still, a wave of shame washes through me and before I can cover myself, Lucien wraps his tattooed fingers around my wrists, stopping me. “I thought you said you hadn’t cut yourself tonight,” he says, his tone almost demanding.

“I didn’t,” I say. “That’s from this afternoon. Before I went to the parking lot.”

He looks down at the barely healed lines, then releases one of my wrists to trace one gently with a fingertip. I shiver helplessly as he touches me. Weirdly, it feels more intimate than when he had his fingers inside me.

Lucien stares at the cuts for a long time, then he glances up at me, his eyes burning. “Don’t ever cut yourself again.” His voice is hard and flat. It’s an order, a command.

I blink at him, not quite understanding. “What?”

“You want pain, you come to me,” he says. “I’ll give it to you.” He leans forward, prowling up my body like a panther until his hands rest on the pillows on either side of my head. “Say, ‘Yes, Lucien.’”

He’s so big, so hot, and there’s nothing in my vision except the blue of his eyes. I want him so badly so I open my mouth to give him what he wants, but before I can say the words, he shifts and he takes one of my nipples between his thumb and forefinger and pinches it hard.

A bright burst of pain streaks through me, along with a dark lick of pleasure, and I gasp aloud, the throb between my legs becoming acute.

“Say it,” he orders, gaze pinned to my face, and this time as he pinches my nipple, he pushes his hips between my thighs, the bulge of his cock flexing against my clit. The pleasure/pain is so fierce and bright. So *good*. I groan, arching against the mattress. “Yes, Lucien,” I manage. “Oh, God, yes...”

“Good girl.” His hips flex again, and he rolls my nipple between his strong fingers, and the pleasure/pain hits me again and I cry out.

It’s so good, I can hardly bear it. I lift my hands to grip his shoulders, but he pushes himself up again, kneeling between my thighs. He shrugs off his leather jacket, then gets rid of his hoodie. He’s wearing a black T-shirt underneath and he grips the hem before pulling it up and over his head in one smooth movement.

And all my remaining breath escapes.

He’s covered in tattoos, black lines tracing every hard, cut muscle of his chest and stomach. Flowers and skulls and mandalas, and panthers creeping through jungles, and dragons flying in the clouds. The tail of one dragon

curls around his throat and up the side of his strong neck, even as the wings stretch across his wide, powerful shoulders.

He's beautiful. I've never been into tattoos before, but they're beautiful, too, and my fingers itch to touch them. To trace those lines down over his chest and the hard corrugations of his abdomen. Then to ask what each one means, if they mean anything at all.

His fingers drop to the buttons of his jeans, and he begins to undo them. The tattoos on his hands extend up both arms, full sleeves, and I'm hypnotised by the way he's flicking open each button.

He's so arrogant as he does so, watching me watching him. Reading my hunger for him. He likes that. He likes my hunger, my desperation.

He's wearing black briefs underneath, the hard line of his cock pushing against the fabric. With an almost casual movement, he reaches into his back pocket, takes out a couple of silver packets and tosses them down on the sheets beside me. Then he shoves his jeans down, taking his briefs with them.

I can't help the full-body shiver that washes over me as my gaze is drawn helplessly to his groin, where his cock curves up. Hard and long and thick, and my God... My breath catches audibly, which is embarrassing, but then full awareness of what's happening suddenly crashes over me, the good girl in me, the girl I was before this man came into my life, screaming at me. What the hell are you doing? You're about to give your virginity to a psychopath who killed a man.

But I don't want to listen to that girl. That girl keeps trying to hold up that crumbling façade on a cracked foundation; and while this man might be a psychopath, he's going to give me what I'm desperate for, and I'm not questioning or second-guessing myself, not this time. I don't want to overthink, count all my anxieties like beads on a rosary. He can give me clean, bright pain along with the pleasure, and I know already that the release will be sweeter than any knife.

Lucien reaches for one of the silver packets and rips it open, going slowly as he takes the condom out before rolling the latex down. I can't stop staring at his hands and the ink on them, at the long, thick length of his cock, and there's something unbearably hot about the way he's sheathing himself.

I swallow, my mouth dry. He's the first man I've seen naked in the flesh, and he's in my childhood bed. He's going to take my virginity and I'm going to let him. I never got the "talk" from my parents. Dad handed me a book and told me gruffly that if I "had any questions" I was to come to him, and that was the extent of it. Of course, I didn't have any questions.

In the book, you're supposed to love the person you have sex with, or at least like them. But I don't love Lucien, and I don't even like him. He's a stranger to me. I know literally nothing about him, except for his name...

And I don't care. I just don't.

He leans forward, placing his hands on either side of my head once again.

With his carved muscles and his tattoos, and the feral light in his eyes as he looks intently down the length of my body. Lingering on my breasts and then down between my thighs. Then he lifts his gaze to mine, but he says nothing. His eyes are burning blue now, no ice in them. No emptiness. I wonder why he cares enough to give me pain along with pleasure, why it matters to him at all, but then I shove the thought away. All that matters is that he's here and I want him, and I can't breathe with how badly I do.

He lifts a hand and cups my breast, my nipple still stinging from the brutal pinch he gave it, and he teases it with the pad of his thumb until I'm trembling and gasping. "More?" he asks.

I nod before I even realise I'm going to and he pinches me again, sending another bolt of pain arrowing through me, and my back arches like I've been hit with a defibrillator as sensation lights me up inside.

His hand catches the small of my back, his large warm palm settling there, and then he's between my spread thighs, the head of his cock pressing against my entrance, and he meets my gaze as he starts to push into me. The eye contact makes everything insanely intimate, and I can't help the moan that tears from my throat as I feel my pussy stretch around him, sensitive tissues burning.

"Take me," he whispers, watching my every reaction. "I know you can."

But he's big, too big. I can't possibly do it, and yet he's pushing deeper, and the room spins as all the air vanishes from my lungs. It feels like an impossibility for him to be inside me, as if he's invading every part of me and leaving no room for even myself.

But that's a good thing, isn't it? I don't want myself to be here. The struggling, failing good girl who cuts herself in secret. I want to be the woman who kissed a killer, who made him hard, who made him want.

I pant, my eyes wide. His features are drawn even tighter, a half-snarl twisting his mouth as he continues to push. "Does it hurt?" he growls, watching me. "Am I hurting you?"

I'm shaking, because yes, it does hurt, but that hurt joins the storm of sensation going through me, a bright, white heat, and I can't tell anymore where the pain starts and the pleasure begins. "Yes," I gasp. "Yes."

His gaze flares, a dark pleasure of his own burning there. "Good." Then he lowers his head, his mouth brushing over my cheeks and the side of my face, and I shudder at the contrast of the softness of his kisses and the brutal thrust of his cock. Then his lips find mine and there's nothing but his taste and his heat and the feel of him inside me, and it feels so good. So good I might die.

I open my mouth to him, kissing him back as his cock settles deep inside me, and when he begins to move, sliding out very slowly before pushing back in, a deep, restless ache begins to build.

His kiss becomes hungrier as he thrusts, and I can't keep still, shifting restlessly beneath him. His body is so hard, and so hot, and I want to touch him.

He lifts his head, watching me as he moves, his eyes a fathomless midnight sky, glittering with stars. "Promise me, Astrid," he says softly, roughly. "Promise me that if you crave punishment, you'll come to me." He reaches one hand down, gripping the back of my leg behind my knee. Then he lifts it, hooking it around his lean waist, letting him slide deeper inside me, and I groan at the sensation. It feels so good I can't stand it.

I can't think, every thought ground into dust by the drive of his hips, crushed by the weight of the pleasure coiling inside me, like a knot pulling tighter and tighter.

He leans down once again, his mouth brushing along my jaw to my ear, his breath warm against my skin. Then he sinks his teeth into my lip, and pain blooms like a flower inside me, twining with the drive of his cock inside me, and I'm on the edge, just on the brink, when he stills, and I'm just about to scream at him to keep going, when I hear it, too: the sound of my dad's footsteps in the hallway outside my door.

Slowly, Lucien lifts his head, ferocity burning in his eyes, and begins to move again, slower this time, quietening the sounds of the bedsprings. I can't do anything but stare back as my pleasure intensifies, which it really shouldn't do with Dad awake. He could open the door, put his head to check on me, the way he used to do when I was little, and that should absolutely kill my desire stone dead. Yet it doesn't. Somehow the risk of being discovered makes all of this even more forbidden, even more erotic.

Lucien changes his angle, rocking his hips, the thrust of his cock nudging my clit and tearing another moan from me. He puts his hand over my mouth once more. "Quiet," he whispers. "You don't want your dad coming in here, do you?"

I shake my head frantically, my breath panting against his palm.

“But you like it, don’t you?” His whisper is hot and rough and velvety, the pressure of his gaze on me relentless. “You like the risk.”

I don’t bother denying it. I don’t bother doing anything but moving my hips with his, chasing more friction, more pressure. My back arches and I want more, I *need* more.

“Lucien.” My voice is muffled against his palm. “Please, oh please...” I don’t know what I’m asking for, but he does. Because he shifts again, his fingers down between us, stroking my clit as he thrusts. “Promise me,” he growls like a beast in my ear. “Promise me and then you can come.”

“Yes, yes ... I promise...” I babble as the knot inside me pulls impossibly tight before bursting apart, the climax exploding like a bomb inside me. I scream against his hand, my back arching like a bow as my pussy convulses around his cock, the wave of pleasure annihilating me.

I’m dimly aware of him moving hard and fast, as if a leash has been let off him, and he drives into me before turning his face against my neck, muffling the roar of his own climax against my skin as it takes him, too.

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Chapter Eighteen

LUCIEN

I lie like a dead man on top of her, crushing her into the mattress, everything in my head gone. All thought, Lazarus, Enzo, my mission, everything. There's nothing in there except quiet. And then reality begins to assert itself.

I fucked a woman I shouldn't have. A target. A *virgin* target. Yes, I wanted to take something for myself, do something because *I* wanted to, and for pleasure alone. I never do anything for pleasure alone. And maybe that's all it would have been if I hadn't seen the scars on her thighs as I put her down on the mattress, and if she hadn't covered them with her hands as if she was ashamed.

They were still fresh, those scars, and beneath them were the faint lines of other cuts, traces of old scars and a lot of them. She's been doing this for a long time, and it should not have mattered to me. I shouldn't have given a shit about her scars, not when I have plenty of my own.

But when I looked into her face and I saw her shame, something shifted in me. She wanted me. I might have come for her, but *she* was the one who kissed me. She was the one who begged me. Not any other man, but *me*.

She is passionate, but I am not, so I can't give her that in return. But I can give her something else she needs, something that she can only get from me. I know pain, I know it well. I have taken it – Enzo made sure of that – and I have given it, and I know how to do it so that it doesn't leave scars.

She shouldn't have those scars marring her pale skin.

I gave her pain with her pleasure, so she could have both, and she was so fucking beautiful with it. I made her lose her mind. I made her scream my name. And I didn't stop, even when I heard the chief get up and start prowling around. She liked that, too, the dangerous nature of nearly getting caught.

She's got a little piece of darkness in her and that fascinates me. I want to keep pushing, see how far that darkness goes. Yet ... I've taken my pleasure. I've indulged myself, had my release. It's over. It's done.

So why did you make her promise to come to you?

I lift my head and look down at her. She has her eyes closed and she's still breathing fast. She's all pink and white and silver, her hair a cloud on the pillow around her head. I can see blood on her bottom lip from where I bit her, and another kick of heat goes through me at the sight.

I made her promise, because I wanted her to come to me for what she needs. I wanted to be the one to give her scars, make her bleed. I wanted to be the one who makes her scream the way she did when she came.

I deal out death, yet the novelty of giving pleasure winds around the empty place in my chest where my heart used to be. It's almost as if being with her gives me hope that I'm something more than just a gun in someone else's hand.

But that's what you are.

Yes. And I'm Enzo's gun, and until I fulfil my promise to him and deliver my family into his hands, that's all I'll ever be. Maybe after, when

he releases me finally, I'll be able to figure out what else I am, but until then I can't afford hope. I never could.

Her lashes flutter then lift, and she looks up at me, her eyes still dark. There's something in them that I don't understand, as if she's discovered something profound.

This is a mistake. She's not mine and I'm not hers. This is just a fuck and now it's done.

I pull out of her, then push myself away, turning to deal with the condom by tossing it into the wastepaper basket beside her desk. And I'm about to move off the bed when I feel her hand touch my bare shoulder, her fingertips finding and tracing one of my own scars.

"What's this?" she asks.

The ones on my back are from a whip. They were from the punishment for my father's indiscretions that Enzo delivered. Not even Enzo's soldiers are immune from his justice, and he made pains to show me that while I was growing up. There was a price to be paid, and I was the one who paid it. In blood.

I endured it. I showed him that he couldn't break me, no matter what he did, and he did a lot. I impressed him, though, and that's why he began my training as one of his soldiers, and soon I was the one dealing out pain instead of delivering it.

No one has ever touched my scars, except the tattooist who did my ink. I didn't have the tattoos to hide them, but to turn them into reminders of how beautiful pain can be, how it can be art. Evidence of endurance and strength.

But of all that is personal and this has already become far too personal for my liking. She might have given me pieces of her soul, but I'm not giving her any of mine. I don't have much of it left to begin with.

"Nothing," I say curtly, pushing myself off the bed and reaching for my clothes.

“Didn’t feel like nothing to me,” she says.

I don’t reply as I tug my underwear on and pull my jeans up.

“Lucien?” Her voice is hesitant and uncertain.

I grit my teeth as I zip up my fly, then turn to her.

She’s on the bed with the patchwork quilt wrapped around her, a crease between her brows, and it takes me a moment or two to realise that the crease is concern, and that concern is directed at me.

Tension crawls along my shoulders. I can’t have her concerned for me. I can’t have her feeling anything at all for me.

“This is just sex,” I say bluntly, so she knows. “Understand? It’s not personal and it doesn’t mean anything. It also won’t happen again.”

An expression like hurt flickers across her face, then it’s gone. Too bad. She was the one who initiated this, who begged me. She must know that there can’t be more between us than a quick fuck. I’m hardly boyfriend material.

Still, she doesn’t look away. “You made me promise not to cut myself. You said I could come to you if I need ... pain.”

“I changed my mind,” I say harshly as I reach for my T-shirt.

“But I—”

“I’m not your boyfriend, Astrid,” I cut her off. “And fucking is not why I’m here. There’s the little question of that information, which you still haven’t provided to me.”

It’s cold, and I know it, but that’s the way it has to be.

She just looks at me. “You made me promise, and now you’re going back on your word?”

“I didn’t give you my word.”

“No, but you meant it.” She pauses, her grey eyes direct. “And you liked it, didn’t you? That got you off.”

More heat winds through my blood, the breathless sound of my name in her mouth echoing in my head. Begging me as I pinched her hard nipple.

The tightness of her cunt around my cock, and her hoarse voice telling me that it hurt. The give of her flesh as I sank my teeth into her lip and the feel of her pussy convulsing around me, as the pain sent her over the edge.

She is the perfect match for you.

The thought nags at me, my recalcitrant cock hardening. The pain I deliver is Enzo's punishment, Enzo's justice, but right here in this bed, the pain I delivered was for her pleasure, and she's not wrong, it was for mine, too.

Aren't you tired of doing everything for other people and having nothing for yourself?

Yes, of course I fucking am. But until I'm free, I can't have anything for myself, and thinking about it is a weakness I can't allow, and yet...

"You want to do this again?" I ask. "Is that what you're saying?"

Her chin lifts. She can't stop challenging me, can she? "Don't you?"

"A fuck is just a fuck, Astrid."

"Not to me it isn't." She straightens, sitting on her bed wrapped in her quilt like a little empress. "I think you want more, Lucien. I think you want to do this again."

She's staring at me so directly and it shouldn't feel as if she can read what's in my head. She's only a sheltered twenty-one-year-old college student, with very limited experience of life, while I'm older and more experienced than her in just about every way. I'm an enforcer, like her friend. A killer, a dealer of pain, without mercy and without hesitation.

"You have no idea what I want, Tinkerbelle." I pull on my T-shirt. "Except for one thing, of course. Which you still haven't given to me."

Her jaw tightens and she leans forward, wrapping her arms around her knees. "Why do you want to know about Dad and the club?"

"That information isn't relevant."

"It's relevant to me. I'd like to know what you're going to do with that information before I give it to you."

Ah. So, *now* she's asking me what all this is about.

I sit on the side of the bed and grab my boots. "Isn't it a little late to be asking that?"

"Better late than never."

"There's no point asking. I'm not going to tell you." I shove one foot into my boot and start with the laces.

"Who are you?"

"You know my name." I tie the laces, then put the other boot on.

"Are you from another club? But no, you don't have a patch, so..."

"Stop asking questions."

Again, there is a light touch on my back, her fingertips trailing down over the cotton of my tee, and I tense in reaction as a ripple of lust curls in my bloodstream. Her touch is like that whisper in my head, insidious, and I have no idea why I'm reacting this way. I'm always in control of myself, always, and yet that beast in me wants to turn and pounce on her, get her underneath me again.

Bite her neck, bite her nipple, bite her thighs. Hold her hard and leave bruises on her pale skin. *My* bruises.

She says nothing, tracing patterns on my back. Everything in me wants to pull away from her touch, but that would mean my control isn't as good as I want it to be, and I can't allow that. So, I stay where I am, lacing my boot as she touches me. It's a test, and I've been tested many times before. I'm immune now.

But her fingers creep beneath the cotton of my tee and she brushes my bare skin, and this time I can't help myself. I turn sharply, grab her wrists, push her down on the bed and pin her there.

She's breathing fast, her face flushed. The quilt has slipped, revealing her pretty tits and those hard little nipples, and when my gaze falls helplessly to them, I know I've betrayed myself.

Fuck. She's a thorn in my side and I'm a fool for letting her be one.

“Shall we go and visit your father now?” I demand roughly, trying to get back on track. “He’ll wonder why you’re naked, but I’ll tell him if you like.”

“No, wait. Let me ask him.” Her gaze never wavers from mine. “Give me another couple of days to talk to him.”

“I already gave you two. Why should I give you more, when I can get it from him now?”

“You really think he’ll tell you?”

“He will if I have my knife at your throat.”

Our gazes are locked, tension seething in the air around us. I don’t know why I’m bothering to argue with her. I don’t know why I haven’t headed into the chief’s bedroom already. But ... she’s warm and half-naked, and I can’t bring myself to let her go. How she’s managed to get under my skin like this, I have no idea, but she has.

“You really want him to see you?” she shoots back. “To know your face? You could kill him afterwards, I guess. But killing the chief of police would draw attention and I’m guessing that’s not what you want.”

I take a breath. She’s not wrong. Killing him would be an unnecessary complication. Besides, that would then involve a replacement who wouldn’t be so understanding of the MC’s operation, which is exactly what we *don’t* want. “Two more days, then,” I say, deciding. “That’s all you’re getting.”

She gives a small nod, but doesn’t look away, and I don’t release her. I don’t know how she managed to get a concession from me when I don’t give concessions to anyone, but again, she has.

My anger at myself tightens, but I shove it away. It’s another dangerous emotion I can’t afford to indulge. Anger leads to mistakes and I can’t have any more of those, not tonight.

I should go. I push myself away from her without a word, but lean down and kiss her mouth hard. I taste her blood from that last nip, feel her shiver, and the desire curls around my throat and squeezes.

It's a close-run thing, but I hold out against it. I can't do this again, not when there is this weakness inside me. This weakness for her.

I lift my head and stare down at her for one last moment. Then I push myself off her and leave without a word.

It's not until I get home that I realise my knife is missing.

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Chapter Nineteen

ASTRID

I sit on my bed, wrapped in my patchwork quilt. Lucien has gone. He just left without a word, and my mouth is throbbing from where he bit it, and I'm sore between my legs, and everything has changed. Including me.

I can't stop thinking about Lucien's hard, tattooed body. His cock driving into me. The blaze of blue in his eyes. The intensity of my orgasm as it swept through me.

First times are supposed to be awkward and hesitating, at least that's what I heard from Rowan. How you just get it over with, because it gets better after that. But my first time... It wasn't awkward or hesitating. There was no gentleness or tenderness, or anything else. Just a blinding pleasure/pain that seemed to reach into my soul and squeeze tight.

They also say that you don't feel any different afterwards, but I do. I feel as if I've been changed in some fundamental way and Lucien is the one who changed me. He altered my brain chemistry, and I have a horrible feeling that I'll never be the same again.

A fuck is just a fuck, Astrid.

His voice echoes, hard and flat, the flames in his eyes already going cold. No, it wasn't just a fuck, not to me, and I don't think it was for him,

either. Unless he offers to give pain to all his conquests. He might. He's just the kind of guy who would, so maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it *was* just a fuck for him, and I'm the one wanting it to be more than that.

He didn't like me touching him, though, that was for sure. When he sat on the bed and put his boots on, his back was to me and the way the light fell over his ink made it clear that there were scars on his skin. His back was covered with them, with ink layered over the top. They were old scars, and when I touched that one, he tensed.

Who is he? What happened to him? And why do I care? Especially when he was fully prepared to drag me into Dad's bedroom and hold a knife to my throat to get my father to tell him what he knows. I had to bargain for more time, and he wasn't going to give it to me, but ... he changed his mind.

Why? Was it for my sake? He was angry, that much I could see before he left, but whether he was angry at me or at himself, I have no idea.

I reach out and slide my hand under the pillow where I hid his knife. I got it out of his boot when he got rid of the condom, and I'm not even sure why. I draw it out and hold it in my hands. The blade is wickedly sharp, the wooden hilt smooth. It looks well handled, well used. This was what he used to kill the man in the parking lot, and maybe I'll use it on myself. He told me to come to him for pain then refused, so now I've got the next best thing. I'll use his knife to let out the fear next time.

A shiver goes through me. I can still feel him everywhere: inside me, on my skin, his flavour on my tongue. And I'm hungry. I want more.

A gust of wind makes my curtains flutter and I realise I've left my window open, and I'm cold. So, I slip out of bed and close my window, firmly drawing the curtains over the glass. Then I find my pyjama bottoms on the floor and pull them on. The top is toast with all the buttons gone, so I throw a T-shirt on over the top. The fabric rubs against my exquisitely sensitive nipples, and the pleasure/pain makes my breath catch. Maybe a

knife won't be enough for me anymore, not after that. Maybe I'll need him, too.

I go back to my bed and try to sleep, but I can't. My brain is too full of what happened, my body wired and jumpy. So, I turn the light back on and sit up, breathing fast, the back of my neck prickling.

It feels as if he's watching me, as if he's still here, somewhere. His presence a weight that I can't get rid of.

I move restlessly out of bed, to the window again, looking out into the darkness. But it's late and there's no one on the street. No one in our yard. The feeling lingers, though, and I turn, staring around my room, consumed with the bone-deep certainty that somehow he's here. Somehow, he's watching me.

It's likely my overactive imagination, but I can't get rid of the feeling, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm examining every inch of my bedroom, looking for God knows what. And that's when I find it, up in one corner, near a poster of Florence and the Machine. A tiny camera. It's so small it fits in the palm of my hand.

Someone really has been watching me.

I'm cold with shock, but also there's a hard certainty inside me. Lucien put this in here, I'm sure of it. It can't be just because he wanted to watch me, it can't. He wanted that information about Dad, so maybe he put cameras elsewhere to monitor us. Maybe there are more.

I leap off my bed, fling open the door to my bedroom, and start working the house over systematically, going from room to room, hunting. Pulling pictures from walls, examining the light shades, going over the curtain rails, searching through knick-knacks. There's a camera in the living room, the front hallway, the stairs and then in the hall upstairs. I don't find any in the bathrooms – which is a mercy – though there's probably one in Dad's bedroom.

After I've turned the house upside down to find them, I rip them all out, absolutely fucking furious at the blatant invasion of my privacy, before going back upstairs to the one in my bedroom. Of course, the angle of the camera gives him a prime view of my bed, and my gut clenches.

He'll have seen me cutting myself and he's probably now got a recording of us having sex.

I'm about to rip it out in a fury, when a sudden thought occurs to me. If he's watching now, he'll have realised that I've found all his cameras and taken them out. And no doubt he'll be expecting me to take this one out, too, but what if I didn't? What if I left it there? And what if I used it to screw with him the way he's been screwing with me?

I stare at the camera as the idea coalesces. He's watched me dress, watched me undress, watched me sleep, watched me do all the things I normally do without knowing he was watching. But *now* I know. And he knows that I know. Which means he'll understand that from now on, anything I do in here will only be what I want him to see. It's a loss of control, a loss of power, for him at least.

But not for me.

I leave it there. He can see me whenever I want him to, but if I don't want him to see me, he won't.

Will he be watching now? Now, you're going to give him what he wanted anyway?

Oh, he's watching. I can feel it. It's the prickle along the back of my neck, the pressure in the air. How long has he been doing this? How long has he been silently observing everything I do?

I should be cold, and scared, because this is scary stuff and he's a scary, scary man, and yeah, there's fear. But also, weirdly, satisfaction. I stole his knife and now I've found his cameras. And yes, I'll talk to my father, I'll have that conversation, and not because he wants the information, but because I do. I need to know what's happening in Blackwater, and how

Wolf and my father are involved, and what giving that information to Lucien means.

“Hey,” I say, looking into the camera lens. “If you’re wondering, I’ve got your knife. Oh, and I found all your little spy cameras, too. I took them all out, but I think I’ll leave this one here.” I smile. “Enjoy the show.”

Then I turn off the light and crawl into bed. The sheets smell of sex and Lucien’s dark spice, and I ache in places I didn’t know I could ache in. I’m also positive that I won’t sleep, but I do.

My last thought before I finally fall into unconsciousness is that I’m glad I didn’t shower, because now I get to smell him on my skin.

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Chapter Twenty

LUCIEN

I've been out hunting all day and I'm just finishing up when Lazarus texts me that Thea has brought us a "present" and it's in the basement.

When I get home, I push open the basement door and walk down the concrete steps, the sounds of someone's harsh breathing echoing off the cinderblock walls.

A man is tied to a chair in the middle the floor, and he's the one making all the noise. Blood is trickling from his mouth, and beneath a fall of lank, dark hair, a bruise is showing on his forehead. He's in jeans and the cut he's wearing makes it obvious who he is.

Lazarus looks up from his stance by the chair and nods as I approach.

"Found yourself a Hellhound, I see," I say, strolling over to him.

"Thea got impatient with her plant," Lazarus says. "So, she decided to handle it herself. Brought him in so I could give him a little incentive."

I make a show of glancing around the empty room. "She doesn't want to help?"

"No." Lazarus looks down at the man in the chair. "She was more interested in having a bubble bath."

"Fuck you," the man growls. "I'm not telling you anything."

Lazarus delivers a casual backhand, the sound of the blow and the man's guttural curse echoing. "A little respect is in order," he says mildly. "Especially considering we haven't even started yet. By the way," Lazarus adds, looking at me, "Moretti seems to have vanished. You know anything about that?"

A memory of the night before plays in my head, of Moretti shoving Astrid up against her car and the barrel of a gun jammed in her side, and the thick, hot, slow-moving anger in my gut rears its head again.

I spent today hunting down the rest of Moretti's crew, but there were only a couple of them, lurking in a motel out of town, waiting for him. It didn't take me long to get rid of them.

"As a matter of fact, I do," I say. "He got in my way, so I dealt with him and others who were with him."

A muscle in the side of Lazarus's jaw leaps. "I thought I told you to leave him alone."

"Like I said, he got in my way." I circle the Hound in the chair, automatically noting the places on his body that could be used as incentive to get him to talk. Difficult in a biker with fierce loyalties, but I've managed to get information out of more difficult subjects. "The Morettis won't come looking for him just yet."

Lazarus grunts. He's not happy, but that's too bad. "Killian's in the city, cementing a possible alliance. I'll ask him to check what the Morettis are doing." He gets out his phone and begins typing a text.

I circle the man again. He has his road name – Creep; how apt – on his back along with his patch.

"So, Creep," I say. "Do you want to do this the easy way? Or the hard way?"

He bares his teeth at me. "Come closer and I'll rip out your throat."

"Bit difficult to do that with your hands and feet tied," I point out mildly. Reaching behind me, I pull out my Glock and make a point of

checking it over. I don't need to check it, but watching me do, it builds anticipation in a subject. Makes them start thinking about what I'm going to do and how I'm going to do it, and how much it will hurt.

Creep sneers. "Like I said, I'm not going to tell you a fucking thing."

"Okay," I say easily. "Have it your way." I lift the Glock and aim at his right kneecap. "What agreement does the chief have with your president? Why does he let you run your little operation without any legal interference?"

"Fuck you," Creep spits.

I pull the trigger and the denim of his jeans explodes, blood splattering everywhere. He howls, screaming obscenities.

"Pussy," Lazarus comments, tucking his phone away as Creep screams. "It's just a kneecap, not the end of the world."

"Right?" I aim my Glock at Creep's other knee, the cold, clear focus of Enzo's chief enforcer sweeping through me. "Let's try that again, shall we? What agreement does the chief have with your president? Why does he let you run your little operation without any legal interference?"

Creep screams more obscenities and since not one of them is the answer I want, I shoot him in the other knee. Over yet more screams, I can feel Lazarus's gaze, so I glance at him, lifting an eyebrow in enquiry.

"You've certainly done this before, haven't you?" he says.

"What?" I say coolly, keeping my face expressionless. "Interrogate someone? Yes. Haven't we all?"

"Oh sure, but you seem to ... enjoy it."

I don't know where he's going with this, so I merely shrug and adjust the aim of my Glock to Creep's balls. "It's not enjoyment. It's focus. We're here to get information, that's all."

"Where were you last night?"

The question almost puts me off my aim because I'm not expecting it. I know Lazarus has had a few doubts about me, but I thought he'd put them

aside for now. Clearly not. He's suspicious. "Killing Moretti," I say. "Well, Creep? How are we doing?"

Creep has stopped screaming and is now moaning, blood seeping through the denim of his jeans.

"I'm the head of the family, Luc, and I told you not to," Lazarus says, his voice deceptively casual. "You follow my orders."

A thread of irritation winds through me. Does he want me to apologise?

While I was out hunting today, I let Enzo know that I'd got rid of Moretti, and as I suspected, he was pleased. We'll eventually have to deal with the rest of the Moretti family, but not until the MC has been dealt with. Surely Lazarus can see that one less Moretti is a good thing. Then again, if he's doubting my loyalty, I need to make sure he doesn't.

"Of course." I hold his gaze. "I apologise." An apology is an easy thing to give him, and it's just words. It's not a blood vow, not like the vows I made to Enzo. "What would you like me to do with Creep here?"

If this satisfies him, Lazarus doesn't show it. He only glances at the man in the chair. "Shoot his cock off."

"Wait!" Creep screams. "Wait, for fuck's sake wait!"

"There something you want to tell us?" I ask, keeping my Glock aimed between his legs.

"I don't know," Creep says, his voice shaking. "I don't know about any agreement. The prez doesn't talk about it. He might talk with the officers, but I'm not an officer."

"Has there ever been a raid on the port?" Lazarus asks.

Creep shakes his head. "No, cops don't go near it."

"What about the clubhouse?" I ask. "Has there ever been a raid there?"

"No," Creep repeats. "Starling visits Sawyer every month, but I don't know about what."

Lazarus and I glance at each other. Interesting. "The chief goes to the clubhouse?" I clarify. He must, since I haven't seen the president anywhere

near Starling's house or in his station.

"Yes." Creep lets out a low moan.

I tried to get eyes in the MC clubhouse as well as the Starlings' home, but the club security was too tight. I wasn't surprised, though. The operation they're running is lucrative and lots of families must be eyeing them, just as we are.

"Thea's plant hasn't seen him there?" I ask Lazarus.

"I don't think so," he says. "She would have told me if so." He frowns. "What about the daughter?"

A streak of heat goes through me at the mention of Astrid, and I try to force it away. Memories of her tight pussy and her moans and the way she looked at me. The light touch of her fingertips on my back. She saw my scars the way I saw hers.

"She needed more time to talk to her father," I say levelly. "I gave her another couple of days."

Lazarus gives another noncommittal grunt. "Why?"

"Because it's easier if she asks him rather than me holding her at gunpoint. I might have to kill her and then our leverage would be lost, and if I had to kill the chief, another cop would just take his place and we can't afford that, either. We need Starling to stay at his post."

Lazarus nods, his gaze narrowing as he nods at Creep. "What about her friend, the enforcer. He's an officer. We could take him."

Creep hears this and makes a strangled noise that sounds like a laugh. "You think you'll get anything out of Wolf? You could shoot his balls off and he'd laugh in your face."

Lazarus gives a long-suffering sigh. "I'm bored of this motherfucker. Get rid of him."

I adjust my aim slightly and before Creep can make another sound, I shoot him in the head. He slumps to the side, a red rose blooming between his eyes.

“You think that prick was right?” Lazarus asks, nodding at the dead Hound. “If we can’t interrogate the girl’s friend, we could use her against him.”

There’s another shift inside me, the beast stirring, growling. It doesn’t like the thought of using Astrid in that way, but I can’t determine why. She failed to get information from her friend last night, and clearly the softly-softly approach didn’t work. So why shouldn’t we use her to get him to talk? He did tell her that he’d put his club first, but how long would he hold out if push came to shove? If we, say, held a gun to her head?

“Let’s wait until she’s talked to the chief,” I hear myself say, even though I didn’t mean to say it. “If that doesn’t work, then we move.”

Again, Lazarus stares at me, his gaze speculative. “Like her tits do you? Is that why you gave her more time.”

I don’t like where this conversation is headed and I don’t like the questioning note in his voice. I holster my Glock. “No,” I say expressionlessly. “I couldn’t give a fuck about her tits. This is about making things easier for us, nothing more.”

I know Lazarus is doubtful, but he doesn’t ask me any more questions.

Later that night, after we’ve gotten rid of the dead Hellhound, I can’t resist the automatic urge to sit in the living room and check the cameras. And I have been resisting. A part of me wants to watch her, wants to know what she’s doing and how she’s feeling after last night. Part of me wants to see the bite mark on her lip, and check if she has any bruises, any evidence of me on her body at all, because I want there to be.

I held out on a camera check all day, to prove to myself that it was just a fuck, nothing more, but now I’m opening up my laptop, telling myself that she might have talked to the chief, maybe she’s mentioned me to him, so I’d better keep tabs on her. Yet when I look at the feeds, a sensation I haven’t felt in years goes through me. Shock.

All my feeds are dead except the one in her bedroom. What the fuck?

I click through to the recording from last night, and of course there's us, having sex in her bed. I watch us, the urge to keep watching so strong that I have to take a breath and force myself to speed up the playback. I don't need to see us fuck again, been there, done that. I fast-forward to after I've gone, then watch her sitting on the bed, still wrapped in the quilt. She slides her hand under one of the pillows and brings out my knife, and in spite of myself, I'm amused.

So, she did take it. Little thief.

She examines it for a long moment, then gets out of bed and goes to the windows, flicking aside the curtain to look outside. Then she turns around and looks around her room, frowning. She's restless and clearly searching for something, her gaze roaming. Then she looks straight at the camera, and her eyes narrow, and she's coming toward it, reaching up to where I put it on the wall near one of her posters. She stares at it for one long moment and then, abruptly, she turns and vanishes out of her room.

Fuck. So that's why my feeds went dead. She found the camera in her bedroom and then went to search the house for more. Tinkerbell's no fool.

I'm irritated that she found all the eyes in her house, but I'm also strangely ... impressed. God knows how she knew to look for cameras, but she did and she found them. Definitely not what I was expecting.

I fast-forward her bedroom feed until she finally comes back in and then watch as she looks at the last camera and says, "Hey. If you're wondering, I've got your knife. Oh, and I found all your little spy cameras, too. I took them all out, but I think I'll leave this one here." She gives me a smile. "Enjoy the show."

I lean back against the couch, irritated and amused in equal measure. She found them all. One point to the good little college girl. Luckily for me, the cameras aren't vital any longer, not now I have her.

The only feed I have left now is the one in her bedroom, and it's empty.

I'm not disappointed, of course not. Why would I be? I was only checking the cameras, nothing more, and now I've checked them, it's clear I don't need to bother anymore.

Yet, I don't move. I stare at her empty bedroom, focusing on her white wrought-iron bed and its bright patchwork quilt. Where I made her come hard and scream my name. Where for the only time in my life, I was in charge. I made the decisions. I controlled things. And for once, it didn't end in death.

My cock hardens, just to spite me, and I'm just about to close the laptop and find myself something more useful to do, when Astrid finally walks in. She must have had a shower since she's wearing a pretty robe covered in blue flowers, and her long hair looks damp.

I still, my breath catching.

She's standing with her back to the camera and slowly – too slowly not to be intentional – she lets it fall from her shoulders and onto the floor, leaving her naked.

This is for me, isn't it? She can't know for sure that I'm watching her live, but she definitely knows that I'll be watching at some point.

I should close the laptop and walk away. I've seen her naked, and while she's certainly beautiful, I've seen plenty of beautiful naked women. Yet even so, I don't move, all the blood in my body rushing below my belt.

Somehow, it's different watching her now, knowing how silky her skin felt, how tight her pussy was, and how sweet she tasted. I can't seem to look away. I find myself reaching out to touch her image on the screen, tracing her shoulder and down her side, over her hip and thigh. Naturally, I feel nothing, but the memories of last night linger. I can still feel her against my fingertips, still taste her on my tongue.

She turns her head to the side, one corner of her mouth lifting. She's doing this to fuck with me, isn't she? Which means I should *definitely* close this laptop and not let her get into my head. But instead I lean forward, as if

that will close the distance between us, enable me to smell her scent, feel her heat. I want her to turn around, give me a glimpse of those pretty tits and the curls between her thighs. I want her to tell me that she wants me.

She doesn't do any of those things, though. Keeping her back to the camera, she picks up a pair of pale-blue lacy sleep shorts and puts them on, followed by a matching lacy camisole with thread-fine straps.

My gut clenches. She's not going to let me see her.

I'm used to being the weapon in Enzo's hands, his decisions mine. But I'm the one with the power when it comes to a target. I'm the one who waits and watches and when the time comes, delivers the killing blow. They never see it coming, because if they did, I would have failed at my job.

But this ... I don't have the power here. She's taken my camera and she's using it against me, and the only thing I can do is stop watching.

And I don't.

My dick hardens, pushing against my fly and the ache becomes even worse, when finally, she turns. The camisole clings to every delicious inch of her tits, her nipples hard and visible through the thin fabric. The fabric of her sleep shorts is thin, too, and for a second I wish she was a brunette so I could see the dark shadow of the curls guarding her pussy.

She looks up at the camera. "You want to watch me, Lucien? Fine. Watch me."

Then she goes over to the bed and pulls my knife out from under her pillow.

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Chapter Twenty-One

ASTRID

I don't know if Lucien is watching me live, but I hope so. And I hope he's furious that I took all his cameras down. This morning, I thought briefly about telling Dad that there were cameras in our house, but I decided not to in the end. He'd have too many questions that might lead him to find out about Lucien, and I can't have anyone finding out about Lucien.

He's *my* secret. Mine. And I'm not giving him up until I've figured out what the hell is going on in Blackwater.

Dad was out all day today, and he's still not home tonight, so I can't talk to him yet about his relationship to the Hellhounds. It's definitely not a conversation I want to have via text, which means I have to wait until he's home.

So, what I should be doing is sitting down at my desk and doing my English assignment, then catching up on my study for my exams.

Yet I'm not working on anything. I can't. Not when Lucien's in my head taking up all the precious space, making my fury rage at what he made me promise then how casually he dismissed me. At how he managed to get into my house and put cameras everywhere without me knowing a thing about it.

I had coffee with Rowan today and she asked what was up, because I seemed quiet and “off”. I wish I could have told her. I wish I could have talked to her the way she talks to me about her crush. Analysing their every text and social media posts, how quickly he responded and did he leave you on read, etc., etc.

It’s not like that with Lucien, though, because this isn’t a normal crush. So, how do I tell her that I’ve been stalked by a beautiful psycho who put cameras all through my house, slit a man’s throat, then took my virginity in my childhood bed?

She’d be horrified. She’d order me to go straight to the police. And why the hell didn’t I say something before now?

I can’t even articulate to myself why I haven’t. Perhaps it’s because the time for telling people has passed. I’ve made myself complicit now in whatever it is that he’s doing. I’m an accessory, and Dad’s not going to like that one bit.

But no, it’s more than that. Lucien’s got under my skin. He’s darkness and violence, and I’m fascinated by that. By his arrogance and his confidence. He’s all ice, his emotions – if he has any – buried deep, while mine are there all the time. I want some of that ice. I want some of that confidence. I want to know what it’s like to be afraid of nothing and no one.

He’s given me another two days to talk to Dad and I will, but I’m not going to sit here and pretend that last night didn’t happen, or that it was “just a fuck”. I won’t. He made me promise not to cut myself again, to come to him if I needed pain, and then he changed his mind. It was like giving me the most perfect present then taking it away before I had a chance to unwrap it.

Asshole.

He watched me for God knows how long, toying with me, learning me, and he was the one with all the power. Yet that night with him showed me that I have power, too, which was why I left his last camera in my bedroom.

I want to remind him of what he made me promise him. I want to mess with him the way he messed with me. So, tonight I'm going to use his knife, use his camera, give myself a release. Show him that he can't tell me what to do, can't dismiss me so easily, not without consequences. He told me not to play games with him. Well, now it's my turn to show him what happens if he plays games with me.

I'm sitting on my bed, his knife in my hands, wearing my summer sleep set, even though it's not really the weather for it. The fabric is thin enough that it may as well be see-through for all it covers, so I hope he's getting a good look.

I glance up at his camera. He's watching, I can feel it.

"You made me promise not to cut myself," I say aloud. "You said I was to come to you if I need pain." I hold the knife up, brandishing it. "You're not here, so this will have to do. Of course, I'd much rather you used it on me yourself, but like you said, a fuck is just a fuck, right?"

My skin tightens at the thought of him watching, a wave of warmth pulsing through my body. I lean forward and place my mother's photo face down again, then put the edge of the blade against my thigh. It's very, very sharp. So sharp that when I draw it across my pale flesh, there's almost no pain at all. But then it hits me and I close my eyes, remembering him pinching my nipple as he drove inside me, and heat rushes through my body.

I take another shaky breath and cut the other thigh, more blood welling, pain a bright thread winding through my body. I lie back on the bed. "I don't need you, anyway, Lucien," I say softly, running my hand down my front and cupping one breast through the fabric of my camisole. "I know how to make myself feel good." I pinch my own nipple through the cotton of my camisole, the way he did last night, feeling it harden into a sharp point as the sensation hits me, a bolt of hot electricity. I rub my thumb over

it, back and forth, watching the camera, feeling the pleasure build hotter, combining with the sweet pain that pushes me higher.

“See?” My voice gets huskier as I pinch myself again. “You didn’t show me anything I didn’t already know.” I slide my hand from my breast, over my stomach, and down to the waistband of my sleep shorts and under to where I’m wet and throbbing. I want to use the knife again, cut myself again as I stroke my clit, but I don’t have enough hands. So I pinch my nipple hard, replicating what he did the night before as I touch my wet flesh, white lightning lights up all my nerve endings. This is so intense. More intense than I thought it would be, and way more intense than it usually is when I touch myself.

Knowing he’s watching me makes my mouth go dry. Suddenly, all I want is to strip my shorts off, spread my legs wide, and touch myself so he can see everything. But that’s not the purpose of what I’m doing. I’m supposed to be playing with him, screwing with him the way he screwed with me.

So, I keep my shorts on as I slide one finger, then another into my slick pussy, and I imagine my hand is his. I imagine that night when he touched me just like this, his long, tattooed fingers deep inside me, giving me pleasure.

I moan and lift my hips, my hand working faster. He’ll be able to see it move, but he’ll have to imagine everything else. God, it feels good. I bite my lower lip hard as the pressure builds, the spark of pain it gives me amplifying the flood of pleasure. I keep going, my head full of him above me, looking down at me as he pushed inside me, and I come hard at the memory, gasping and arching on the bed as lights explode behind my eyes.

Afterwards, I lie there, boneless and sated for a few moments, then I open my eyes and look at the camera. “Turns out, all I needed was your knife,” I murmur. “I didn’t need you at all.”

It feels a bit anti-climactic to simply roll over and go to sleep, so I get up and turn the camera angle so it's pointed at my window instead, because right now, that's all I'm going to let him see.

He got a show, but now that show is definitely over.

I'm just getting back into bed when my phone on my nightstand lights up. I glance at the screen. It's a message from an unknown number. All it says is:

You're playing with fire, Tinkerbell.

A hot thrill arrows down my spine. Of course it's Lucien.

How he got my number, I have no idea, but some part of me isn't surprised that he has it. He had cameras in my house, so why wouldn't he know my cell, too?

I lean back against the pillows as satisfaction stretches out inside me. So, I was right, he was watching me. And he saw me cut myself, touch myself, make myself come. And that *did* have some effect on him. It must have if he's texting me immediately.

Why?

It's just a fuck, Lucien.

There's a pause and then his reply comes back.

You like pushing, don't you?

I don't know why that makes me smile, but it does.

And you like me pushing.

Did you like me using your knife, too?

Another pause, the three dots blinking, and I'm hypnotised by them. I want to know if he liked it. I want to know that I affected him.

Yes.

There's nothing more, just that one word, and the breath I didn't realise I was holding rushes out of me. Yes, God, he did like it. A surge of satisfaction and excitement hits me, and in this moment, I feel as if I've won a prize.

It's been a long time since I've felt this way about anything.

Anxiety has been overpowering me ever since Dad started pulling away from me and putting distance between us. Anxiety about how I can fix things for him, make up for him losing Mom and getting me instead. Anxiety about getting into med school and continuing what she'd planned to do. And deep down, anxiety about whether I *can* fix anything at all.

I know Lucien's a threat. I know he's dangerous. But staring down at his texts on the screen, I realise that he's also an escape. He's a reminder that there are other things out there, darker things that make my concerns and anxieties seem small and almost ... silly. And I don't mind that. Lately, everything has felt impossible to manage, what with college and med school and my grades. I've been crushed by the weight of my own expectations, yet I watched Lucien slitting a man's throat in front of me, and really, what's so bad about my life compared to that?

But I'll need it back.

You can give it to me along with the information you owe me.

Ah yes, that.

I debate answering, then decide not to, putting my phone screen-down on my nightstand instead.

I'll get him his information, but if he wants the knife, he'll have to beg for it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

LUCIEN

I lean against one of the shelves in the campus library, holding a book open in front of me as if I'm reading.

But I'm not reading.

I'm watching Astrid, even though I shouldn't be, even though I have no reason to keep an eye on her. I gave her two days to talk to her father, and that time isn't up yet. She's got till the end of today.

It's not as if I don't have anything else to do. I have to give Enzo a report at some point, find out exactly what kind of alliances Lazarus is making in preparation to take the MC's operation, and who is involved. Enzo needs all the details, and I've been somewhat remiss at getting them.

In fact, Lazarus wanted me to come with him to the city today, to talk to a few people, and I should have gone, yet I found myself telling him I needed to talk to "the girl" instead.

Then I came here, to the library, where she's working a late shift, so I can stop her from running if she hasn't got what I want. But I know that's not the reason. I'm lying to myself.

I'm here because I want to be. Because I want to see her.

That little show she gave me last night was a test and I knew it. She was pushing me, using my knife, touching herself, telling me that she didn't need me. She has more scars on her thighs now, scars from my knife, marring her pretty pale skin.

I shift against the shelves as the beast in me growls, the sight of her pinching her own nipples as she touched herself filling my head. I should have been there. I should have been the one running the knife over her skin, giving her the pain she needs along with the pleasure. I should have been the one punishing her, because that's why she's doing it, even though she might deny it. That was clear to me the night I fucked her in her bedroom, when she told me all her deep, dark secrets. About her mother and her struggles to be worth that kind of sacrifice, and how right at the heart of everything, she's afraid she isn't.

I know all about that sacrifice. The one my mother made for me, the same as her mother made for her: each dying to protect their children. But I'm not punishing myself the way Astrid is. Enzo delivered all the punishment I needed and then some, and now all my guilt is gone.

Through a gap in the shelves, I see her go about her work, pushing her little book cart. She's in a dark blue dress today with a short, frothy skirt and black tights, hiding away the cuts she gave herself last night. Her hair is loose down her back, all soft ringlets and curls.

Again, you'd never know that last night she took my knife and cut herself, before touching that pretty cunt of hers until she came. She's so diligent and hard-working on the outside, but on the inside there's darkness and fire. She's a volcano, this woman, and where she was dormant, she's now waking up. Now the pressure is building and building, and her knife lets out some of the magma burning inside her, but it's not enough. Eventually, those knife cuts will lose their effectiveness, and she'll go searching for something else, something more intense, more drastic.

People become inured to things, I've seen it happen. Small acts of violence eventually mean nothing, so they have to become larger, more extensive, more extreme in order to do their work.

I can't say I'm not inured myself. You can't exist in this world without losing pieces of your humanity, and I lost mine years ago. Still, I'm almost ... concerned for her. I don't like the thought of her trying to find new ways to hurt herself. She doesn't know what she's doing, and she could do herself real damage. She might even find something, or someone, else to give her what she needs.

My whole body goes tight as that thought flickers through my head. She's not mine, as I told myself many times, and I shouldn't be feeling this way about her. Yet I'm angry at the idea of her going to someone else. She took my knife for a reason, and she left that camera in her bedroom for a reason, too. She didn't give me that little show to demonstrate that she didn't need me, but to prove she does.

So no, she won't go to anyone else. Not when she wants me.

Doesn't that make her yours?

I grit my teeth, watching as she goes around another shelf, disappearing from view, and I put down the book I'm holding and go after her.

It's dangerous to want anything in my world. It's like putting a gun into your enemy's hand and telling them to shoot you with it. It'll kill you, and if you're the kind of stupid my father was, it'll kill your entire family, too.

Keeping myself from wanting anything and needing nothing except the freedom Enzo promised me, has been the only control over my own life that I have, and now Astrid's mere presence is threatening that. It should only be physical, this pull to her, but my concern for her pain and her scars make me suspect she's got further under my skin than I thought.

I need to put distance between us.

I need to get that information from her and then never see her again.

Denial kicks inside me, the beast growling its displeasure, but I ignore it. This growing obsession with her has gone far enough, and it needs to end.

I watch for the next couple of hours, indulging myself since I've made my decision. Then when she finishes her shift, I follow her out to the quad. My plan for tonight was to track her to her car then get my information from her.

However, my plans are derailed when I discover that her enforcer friend, the Hellhound, is waiting in the quad for her.

She stops dead as soon as she sees him, and he quickly comes up to her, his expression serious. I linger in the shadows watching them, leashing my irritation at his interference. The Hound must have a lot to say since he's there a good long while talking to her, while she stands quiet and still and tense.

I'm too far away to hear what they're saying, but I wonder if it's to do with him refusing to talk to her about the club's business. That hurt her, I saw the expression on her face, and maybe he knows that.

After the Hound has said his piece, Astrid responds and they talk a bit more. Her body language has relaxed, which must mean they're good with each other, at least for now, but then the Hound says something that makes Astrid laugh, and though I've heard her laugh before, that night by the bonfire, now every cell in my body freezes at the sound.

In Enzo's house, no one laughs, except when he has the bosses around for one of his poker nights. It's all about building alliances over cards and money and drinking fine whisky while smoking his favourite Cubans. There's laughter then, though it's all fake. It's a performance, a show, but there's nothing fake about Astrid's laugh.

I don't know why it's hitting me so intensely when it didn't before. Perhaps because before, I didn't know her. I hadn't kissed her, touched her,

fucked her. I hadn't felt her touch the scars on my back gently, lightly, as if she didn't want to hurt me.

Hearing that laugh now ... it's a beautiful thing. Warm and bright, and it makes my chest ache for no good reason at all. I make people go white with fear, and scream and beg for their lives, and yet all I want tonight is to make Astrid Starling laugh so I can hear it again.

She's smiling up at her friend, and again, it's natural and warm, like sunshine. I want her to give that smile to me. I want it to be mine. I want her laughter to be mine, too. What would it be like to have that? To go to bed every night with a woman beside you who smiles at you the way she's smiling at him right now. To have that be yours and only yours.

A growl gathers in my throat, and I have to force it back down as they make a move toward the parking lot.

I don't know why I keep thinking these things when I know I can't have them. When I know I *shouldn't* have them. There's only one thing I want, only one, and that's freedom. I can't forget that.

I tail them, keeping some distance, and he makes her laugh again as they walk over to where Astrid has parked her yellow Beetle. I pause in the shadows by a van as a hot feeling collects in my gut, burning like acid. I've never felt this before, so it takes me a few moments to realise it's jealousy.

I'm jealous of her friend and how he makes her laugh, how he makes her smile, and it's ludicrous. Why do I care? I fucked her once, that's all, and while I'm having difficulty getting her out of my head, there's nothing more to it than maybe a lingering physical attraction.

I detach myself. Make myself hard and clear and focused. Make myself Enzo's ruthless enforcer. Get the information from her, that's what I'm here for and that's all. And if she doesn't have it, I'll drag her back home and use her to get it out of the chief. Their relationship may be problematic, but he's her father. His instinct will be to protect his child.

Over by the car, the Hound takes a step closer to her and lifts a hand to cup her cheek. She doesn't move. She keeps smiling up at him. But unexpectedly, he bends his head to kiss her, and I take an unconscious step toward them, my foot catching a can lying next to the wheel of the van. It rolls over the concrete, making a clanging sound, and I freeze.

Fuck. That's a soldier's mistake. A rookie's error. I never make mistakes like that, not ever.

The noise draws their attention. Astrid looks sharply in my direction and so does the Hound, and it's too late for me to retreat back into the shadows. They spot me, and immediately the Hound steps forward, putting himself in front of Astrid, scowling in my direction. "What the fuck do you want?" he demands.

Then Astrid makes it worse, by squinting in my direction and saying, "Lucien?"

This is a problem. A real fucking problem. The Hound has seen me and now he knows my name, and he'll know immediately that I'm not one of her friends. He's part of the same world I inhabit, and he'll know a killer when he sees one.

The Hound glances at Astrid. "Lucien? You know this prick?"

"Yes," she says hesitantly, looking shocked. "He's um ... um ... a ... friend."

But he knows that's a lie already. "Yeah, I don't think he is," the Hound says and starts walking toward me.

There's only one way this is going to end, and unfortunately, it's not going to be pretty. I can't have Astrid's friend knowing my name, my face, not yet, which means I'll have to kill him.

"Wolf," Astrid says, walking quickly after him. "Wait. Don't—"

I'm a fast draw, but the Hound surprises me with a sudden burst of speed, throwing himself at me before I can get my Glock. I let him take me onto the ground, before rolling with him so I can gain an advantage. It's

unfortunate Astrid took my knife, so I can't use that, but my fists will do to knock him out, then I'll strangle him with the nylon garotte I have in my jacket pocket.

Astrid shrieks, but I don't pay any attention as the Hound fights back. He's surprisingly strong and better than I expected with his fists. He manages to get in a few punches, but he's not a professional like me. He doesn't know how to render someone unconscious quickly and cleanly, and with minimal effort.

Eventually, I get astride him and beat him until he's out cold on the concrete, then I reach into my jacket to grab my garotte.

"No!" Astrid shouts and rushes over, grabbing at my wrist and holding it tight. "Don't you dare kill him." Her silver eyes blaze with fury. "If you kill him, I'll never tell you what you want to know. Never."

I try to jerk my hand from her grip, but she just holds on, her blunt nails digging into my skin. "He's seen my face, and he knows my name," I say, through gritted teeth, annoyed that I have to spell it out for her. "I can't let him live."

"No," she says again, low and hard and furious. "If you do, I'll never tell you anything. You can send pieces of me back to Dad, but I won't say a goddamn word."

Her face is pale, and fierce in the dim light, her eyes burning. And I have the strangest thought. She loves him. She loves her friend, and she'll sacrifice herself for him without hesitation.

What would it be like to have a friend like her? To have someone who would give their life for yours? My mother did, but I barely remember her. She gave her life for mine, a life that ended up being cheap. Enzo would get rid of me without a second's thought if he had doubts about me, while at the same time, expecting me to give my life for his.

The price of my freedom is total obedience.

But Astrid has no such issues. She's choosing this. She really would die for him.

Taking a life is the easiest thing in the world, but taking this one, in front of Astrid Starling, suddenly feels like the most difficult thing I've ever done.

I wanted to make her laugh, not make her cry, so what to do?

There's only one option. If I can't kill him, I'll have to take him somewhere, keep him locked up so he can't warn his club, at least until all this is over. It's messy, and I don't like it, but ... I don't like the alternative, either.

"Okay," I say. "Okay." I let go of my garotte and gently peel Astrid's fingers from my wrist. "He can live. But I can't let him go free, understand?"

Her lush mouth is a thin line, anger still burning in her eyes. "Why not?"

"You think he won't ask you questions about how you know me? You think he won't inform his club? We're villains, Tinkerbelle. We recognise each other."

"He's *not* a villain." She's breathing very fast. "He's my friend."

"Yes, and that's why I'm letting him live." I get to my feet and hold my hand. "Keys."

Her chest heaves with fury, her expression taut. But she reaches into her backpack and pulls out the keys, dropping them into my palm.

"Get in the car," I say shortly. "I'll deal with him."

She ignores me, crouching down beside her friend instead, and touching his bloody face gently. "Where are you going to put him?"

Again, I ignore the flick of jealousy at the way she's looking at him, touching him. She's not mine and I need to keep reminding myself of that.

"The trunk," I say as I stride to the car and unlock it. "Now, get in. I won't ask again."

She hesitates a couple of seconds, then, with a very obvious and furious reluctance, she climbs into the passenger seat.

I drag the unconscious Hound over to the Beetle and toss him in the trunk. Then I get into the car and get the fuck out of there.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

ASTRID

I'm boiling with a strange combination of rage and fear as Lucien guns poor Matilda's engine, screeching out of the parking lot like a bat out of hell.

He nearly killed Wolf. Wolf nearly died.

Because of you.

I grit my teeth and clasp my hands together tightly in my lap. I can't believe I was so stupid as to say Lucien's name. I was just ... shocked when I saw him. Wolf had come to meet me to apologise about the way he'd left things when I'd pushed him to tell me about the club, and to see if I was okay.

I wasn't, of course, but Wolf has always been able to make me smile, and after the day I'd had, with all my threat senses on high alert looking out for Lucien, I appreciated his presence.

My gut churns, and not only because I'm afraid for Wolf. Just before Lucien appeared out of the darkness, he told me how much I meant to him and then ... bent his head and kissed me, and it wasn't a friendship kind of kiss, either. It shocked me.

But that's not something I can think about right now. Lucien has Wolf unconscious in Matilda's trunk, and I don't know where we're going or why.

Lucien drives with single-minded focus, his tattooed hands gripping the wheel. There's blood on his knuckles, Wolf's blood, and suddenly all I can see is that man Lucien killed, and his blood gushing from his slit throat.

I swallow. Thank God I took Lucien's knife otherwise Wolf would have been bleeding out on the concrete instead of being still alive and in the trunk. And he *is* still alive. I've seen Lucien kill and he doesn't hesitate, but...

"... that's why I'm letting him live."

I can't help looking at him now, my gaze caught by the purity of his profile. How is it that such a beautiful man came to be such a cold-hearted killer? Where did he come from? Who is he working with? And why did he let Wolf live for me?

I should have asked him these questions days ago, but he's already made it pretty clear he won't answer them.

"You bring my knife?" he asks into the heavy silence, his gaze on the road ahead.

"Yes," I say. It's in my backpack. "Where are we going?"

He ignores me. "You get the information I wanted?"

The information, the information. The fucking information.

"Well," I say sarcastically, "I was going to talk to Dad tonight, but apparently that's not going to happen since I'm now in the car with you."

"I gave you two days, Astrid," he says expressionlessly.

"And I gave you a hard-on," I snap back, which isn't exactly top-notch banter, but I'm tired.

He glances at me. "Yes," he says unexpectedly. "You did."

There's heat in his eyes now, and it's glittering, and despite my fury, an answering heat flickers to life inside me. Not that it ever died. Not when

I've been thinking of him constantly since I gave him that show in my bedroom.

I look away, though, angry enough that I don't want him to see it. "You didn't answer my question," I say, staring out the window. "Where the fuck are we going?"

"Somewhere else," Lucien says.

"That tells me nothing."

He doesn't respond, so I glance back at him, but he's gazing intently out the front windshield.

Anger at him and his constant refusal to answer my questions burns hot in my chest. "You've been following me all day, haven't you? That's why you were in the parking lot just before."

More silence.

"Oh, for God's sake, why don't you—"

"He kissed you," Lucien interrupts, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

I'm momentarily taken off-balance. "What?"

"He fucking kissed you." Lucien's cold voice has become a deep, rough growl.

Oh, right. Wolf and the kiss I really don't want to think about or talk about and especially not with Lucien Frost.

"So?" I stare angrily at Lucien's hard profile. "He's my best friend. He didn't mean anything by it."

Lucien lets out a short, mirthless laugh. "Don't be naïve. You don't kiss your friends on the mouth."

For a second, I wonder why he's so hung up on a kiss, and then it hits me.

He's jealous. Lucien Frost, cold-hearted killer, is jealous of Wolf.

My gut clenches as my brain processes what that means. If he's jealous of Wolf then he must feel something for me, surely? Because if he didn't

care, he wouldn't be jealous.

I lean back in my seat, staring at his taut profile. "What's it to you?" I ask. "You're not my boyfriend, remember?" That's what he told me the night we had sex, and I can't resist using it against him now.

He's silent for a long moment, staring straight ahead, his expression unreadable, and I think he's not going to answer yet again. Then he says, "I'm not your boyfriend, no. But you're mine all the same."

His? What? Shock ripples through me. "What do you mean?" I ask blankly.

Another flash of burning blue as he glances at me. "I mean, you're mine, Astrid. You're my target. My source. Your body is mine and so is your pain. All of you is mine."

The shock tightens its grip, even as a small, lost part of me aches. He has seen the deepest part of me, the dark part of me that I'm too afraid to show anyone, and he didn't turn away. No, he's claimed it for himself instead.

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing at all, my heart aching painfully in my chest. That dark part of me loves the idea of being his, it loves the idea of being claimed, but the rest of me knows it's impossible. How can I be his? He's a criminal, and I'm just a college student, and I have plans. I have dreams. And what does being his even mean?

Silence falls, weighted as a lead curtain.

It gets too much for me, so eventually I say, "What are you going to do with Wolf?"

A muscle flicks in Lucien's jaw. "I have a place I can hide him."

"If the club finds out he's gone, they'll try and find him."

"I know. I've had dealings with outlaw clubs before."

I want to ask when and where and how, but I shove my curiosity down. It's not the time. "Then you'll know they'll hunt you down," I tell him.

“They can try. But first they’ll have to know that I’m the one who took him, which will be difficult when they don’t know of my existence.”

“So, what about me?” I almost don’t want to know the answer to that question, but I have to ask it. I have to know. “I mean, I presume you’re not dropping me home, right?”

“No.” He glances back at the road ahead of us. “Not yet.”

“So where are you taking me?”

He doesn’t say anything for a long moment. “Turn your phone off.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want us being tracked.”

Cold prickles over me as the heat of my anger dissipates. “By who?”

“By anyone.”

I clasp my hands tighter, the cold thread turning to ice as something occurs to me. I’m no longer in my house, with my father, and my studies. I’m no longer in my safe, normal little world. Now, he’s dragged me into his and I don’t know anything about it, except that it’s dangerous. No, not just dangerous. It’s deadly.

From somewhere, I scrape up some courage. “I’m not turning it off until you tell me where the hell you’re taking me and why.”

For a second, Lucien doesn’t move. Then abruptly, he leans over, grabs my backpack, upends it into my lap, grabs my phone from the pile of stuff, winds down the window and throws my phone into the darkness.

I’m so surprised that all I can do is stare at him.

He winds the window back up again, his gaze once more on the road. “Next time, do what I tell you, Tinkerbell.”

“Asshole,” I say, my anger welling up again. “That’s the second time you’ve emptied my backpack and gotten my stuff everywhere.”

He flashes another intense stare at me and says nothing, but that heat is burning in his eyes again. The fire and the hunger, and I know all at once

that wherever he's taking me, and whatever he's going to do to me, it's about us. About what's between us.

A shiver goes down my spine, and once again I turn my gaze from him, shoving my stuff into my backpack again before staring out the passenger side window. It looks like we're heading out of town, the trees of the forest around Blackwater closing in around us.

We drive in silence for another fifteen minutes, then Lucien turns the car down a stony driveway, half-hidden by trees and bushes by the side of the road. We wind through forest until we finally pull up outside what looks to be a literal cabin in the woods: made of logs, with a peaked roof and a porch out the front.

"What is this place?" I ask him as he stops the car out the front.

"A safe house," he says shortly. "Come on, let's go inside."

A safe house? Safe from what?

Yet more questions I probably won't get answers to, so I keep my mouth shut as I get out of the car and follow him up the steps to the front door. It's a cold night, and I'm regretting my decision to wear a short dress and tights, but it's too late to do anything about it now.

Lucien pulls some keys from his pocket and unlocks the door, opening it then gesturing at me to go inside. "Go in. I'll deal with your friend."

I glance at Matilda's trunk, my heart tightening. "Don't hurt him."

Lucien's gaze is steady. "I can't promise that, but I can promise not to kill him."

I don't know why I believe him, because I really shouldn't. He's already proved that killing means nothing to him, then there's the fact that he promised me that I should come to him when I needed pain, before reneging on that promise. Still, if he'd really wanted Wolf dead he'd have killed him in the parking lot.

I nod and step inside, flicking the lights on. It's cold in the house – I can see my breath – and it smells damp and musty, as if no one has lived here

for a long time. The hallway is dark even with the lights on, but through one door is a big living area with a large stone fireplace against one wall. The room has a heavy-beamed low ceiling, and the walls are wood, too. A couple of worn couches have been positioned in front of the fire, but there isn't much in the way of other furniture.

This can't be his home, can it? Not when it feels so unlivable in.

The hearth is stacked with wood, ready to be lit, so I hunt around for something to light it with. I finally find a box of matches in the drawer of a large sideboard, so I take them over to the fire, crouching down to light it.

My fire-lighting skills are minimal, so I'm rather pleased with myself as I manage to get a blaze going, the heat beginning to warm the room. I sit in front of the fire, feeding it kindling, and debate using this time when Lucien is busy to escape. He's got Matilda's keys, though, so I'd have to walk all the way through the dark back home. But it's not the prospect of a cold walk that makes me stay in front of the fire.

It's him.

"You're my target. My source. Your body is mine and so is your pain. All of you is mine."

I close my eyes, hearing those words in his deep, dark voice. I want to know what they mean. I want to know why he said them. I want to know what happens next, because I have no idea.

He's got me and he's got Wolf, but he doesn't have the information I told him I'd get. How important is that to him? Why bring me here when I could be talking to my dad right now? What does he even want with me?

"You got the fire going."

I startle as I hear his voice behind me. For such a tall, muscular man he moves so quietly. It's unnerving.

I turn around to find him standing there, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his expression, as per usual, unreadable. His perfect face, though, is marred. One of his eyebrows is split, blood trailing down from it.

“Wolf wasn’t happy about being kidnapped, was he?” I ask dryly.

“No,” Lucien says, equally dry. “But you’ll be happy to know I didn’t kill him.”

“Good.” Slowly, I get to my feet. “I believed you when you said you wouldn’t.”

“Did you?” His gaze is level as I approach. “That was stupid of you.”

I stop in front of him, looking up at his face. “If it was stupid, then why bother telling me you wouldn’t?”

A muscle flicks in his jaw. He doesn’t like being questioned, does he? Well, that’s too bad, because I am made of questions.

I fold my arms and start with the most minor one. “I guess you don’t live here, do you?”

“No. Like I said, it’s a safe house.”

“Safe from what?”

“Everyone.”

“Your one-word answers are beginning to wear a little thin.”

“Then stop asking questions.” His features are hard, his blue eyes glittering. There’s no give in him. He’s like granite, unmoving and cold.

I shouldn’t be curious about him, I really shouldn’t, but now I want to know what happened to make him like he is. What kind of life does he live that killing means nothing to him? He’s not cold, either, not all the way through, because if he was, he wouldn’t have looked at me with hunger in his eyes. He wouldn’t have made me promise not to cut myself. He wouldn’t have told me to come to him instead.

He wouldn’t have told me that I was his.

I let out a breath then, not knowing what else to do as the moment lengthens between us. I frown at the cut on his eyebrow. “That needs cleaning,” I say.

“Later.” He digs into his pocket and pulls out his phone, glancing down at the screen. And I don’t know why I do it, but I reach out, put my finger

underneath his chin and lift his gaze to mine.

“No,” I say gently. “Now.”

Something shifts in his eyes, something I don’t recognise. “You worried about me, Tinkerbell?”

“Does anyone worry about you, Lucien Frost?”

His gaze flickers again and I sense a subtle tension winding through him. But he doesn’t pull away. He lets me keep my finger right where it is, under his chin. “Do I look like the kind of guy anyone would worry about?” he says.

“Only if they came across you in a dark alley one night.” His skin is warm beneath my fingertip, and I remember the feel of it from the night we slept together. The sculptural ridges of his muscles beneath all that ink and the heat of his body. “You need to stop answering questions with more questions.”

His attention falls to my mouth then back up again. “And you need to stop telling me what to do.”

But there’s no force in the words, and the glitter in his eyes tells me that my presence is having the same effect on him as his is on me.

“Let me clean up that cut, first”—I drop my finger and reach for his hand instead—“then you can tell me why we’re here.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

LUCIEN

Her fingers are warm as they lace through mine, and she turns as if she has no doubt in the world that I'm going to follow her, and for some reason I do.

I don't even feel the cut where the Hound's fist caught me. He was still unconscious when I dragged him out of the car but started to come to as I took him over to one of the sheds, the one with a padlock on the door. He struggled as I got the door open and caught me a glancing blow on my eye socket, but I hit him again, then kept hitting him until he stayed down, before stuffing him into the shed. He'll be out cold for another hour or two, with any luck.

He'll be a problem later, but right now my biggest problem is the woman currently leading me out of the living room and into the dim hallway in search of a bathroom.

I have no idea why I put her in the car. I have no idea why I told her she was mine. It would be helpful to believe it was panic on my part, after her friend decided I was an issue and I decided not to kill him. But I never panic.

No, it was because after he kissed her, I couldn't let her go.

This house is one Lazarus bought at the same time as the other property in Blackwater. It's here for us to use if we get any heat, except the kind of heat I'm getting is probably not the kind Lazarus was envisaging.

Acting without thinking is something I don't do. Acting without thought of the consequences, on instinct, spontaneously... Again, I just don't do that. Yet I did, back in that parking lot, when I beat Astrid's friend into the ground then put him in the trunk and her in the car.

I still had no idea what I was doing when I tore out of Blackwater, only that I needed somewhere safe to store him. And as for her...

She's leading me down the hall, her hand in mine as if we're boyfriend and girlfriend, or something as normal, as mundane and pedestrian as that. The killer and the college girl. It's a movie that almost writes itself.

But this isn't a movie, and when she asked me why I punched her friend, the truth came out. It wasn't because he was a Hellhound and my mission is to take them down. It wasn't because he was a threat or a danger to me or to her. No, I hit him because he kissed her, because she was right, I was jealous. And that was the moment I knew I had to stop lying to myself.

I've been possessive of her and jealous of her friend, unable to walk away from her, all the while telling myself it was because I needed her for intel, nothing more. But it's not because of that at all. It's because the moment she was attacked in the parking lot by Angelo Moretti, and I killed him, she became mine.

She's my target. My source of information. She told me her secrets and now they're mine, and like I told her: when she let me fuck her, be her first, her body became mine as well.

I've never had anything of my own before, not if you don't count the clothes on my back and my gun, which I don't. I've never had a person, for example. I thought that I didn't need one. I *wanted* not to need one. Not when in the world I live in, where needs and wants can be used against you.

But my subconscious disagreed, and that's why I put her in the car, not even knowing myself until that moment when she pointed out my jealousy.

I can't have a person who's mine, yet I can't walk away from her. I can't let her go. And now I'm letting her lead me down this fucking hallway as if I was a normal man, a house cat.

Of course, I could use her when her friend wakes up the way I was going to use her with the chief. That would really be a test of the Hellhound's loyalties if I started cutting pieces off his best friend in front of him. And maybe I will have to do that in the end, but right now...

Right now, I can't pull my hand out of hers. All I can do is follow her.

The bathroom is small, basic, and not well lit. There's an old wooden vanity and sink with a plain mirror above it. A toilet. A shower cubicle.

"Stand here," Astrid says, indicating the vanity.

I lean back against it as she rummages in its drawer for God knows what. First-aid supplies likely, which we have here for obvious reasons. Not that I'll need anything drastic. It's just a split eyebrow.

She pulls out some cotton-wool balls and some disinfectant, which she drips on to one of the balls. A sharp, medicinal smell fills the small space, reminding me of other times where I've needed first aid, painful times. But I'm good at shoving those memories to the side, so I do, concentrating instead on the woman standing in front of me who's lifting her hand to dab at my eyebrow with the disinfectant. Her brow is furrowed with concentration and despite the acrid smell, I catch a hint of her own scent, lavender and sweetness.

I barely feel it as she dabs, too busy staring at her face, faintly amazed that this little fairy of a woman is carefully cleaning an insignificant cut on my face as if it were a gaping wound. Why? It can't be out of concern for me, surely? Not when all I've done is threaten to hurt her and the people she cares about.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, even though I shouldn't care.

“Cleaning your cut? Because it’s bleeding.”

“So?”

Her gaze comes to mine and she gives me a level look. “Why are you letting me?”

“Now who’s answering questions with questions.”

She lets out a breath and returns her attention to my eyebrow, remaining silent for a while. “You really don’t like admitting to anything, do you?”

“Not if I don’t have to,” I say, which is true.

“Why not?”

I shift against the vanity. She’s standing very close and I can feel the delicate brush of her fingertips on my skin as she cleans away the blood on my brow. We haven’t been this close since we had sex in her bedroom, and I keep thinking about it. I keep thinking about how hard her nipples were and how tight her pussy was, and how she gasped and moaned as I fucked her. How she screamed when she came.

“Because it’s a mistake in my world,” I say before I can stop myself.

She nods gravely. “And what world is that?”

“I think you know already.” I can’t take my gaze from her mouth. I know how that bottom lip tasted when I sunk my teeth into it, how sweet she was.

“Just going to take a wild stab in the dark and guess that it’s crime related.” She leans back to examine her handiwork, then disposes of the cotton ball, before picking another up and dampening it with some water.

I don’t like another person getting this close to me. It makes me tense. Yet as she dabs away at my eyebrow, there’s no tension in me at all. She’s no physical threat, of course, but I can’t deny there’s something ... relaxing about her tending to me. No one ever has before. I’ve always had to stitch myself up. But now she’s cleaning away the blood with gentle fingers, touching my skin as if she’s afraid of hurting me. It’s strange to have someone be concerned with my pain.

“Perhaps,” I say.

“Can neither confirm nor deny, hmm?” Her gaze drops to mine again and one corner of that luscious mouth of hers curves in a smile.

A smile directed at me. *Because of me.*

I can’t help myself. I lift a hand, thread my fingers into her hair and grip it. Her breath catches audibly, but she doesn’t move. Her eyes have gone dark and when I touch the curve of her mouth with a fingertip, she goes still.

I stroke her pillowy bottom lip, and a fine tremor runs through her. The pulse at the base of her throat flutters. Last time, she was the one who kissed me. She was the one who started it. And now she’s waiting for me to continue it, isn’t she? That’s what she wanted when she gave me that little show in her bedroom.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Astrid?” I ask softly, looking into her eyes.

Her throat moves as she swallows. “Do you want to fuck me?”

I don’t admit to anything, no, and the reasons I don’t are obvious. But there’s no one else here in this bathroom, and as of right now, no one knows what she is to me. I’ve already told her she’s mine, and she must be able to feel my hard-on pressing against the zipper of my jeans, but she wants me to say the words, I can tell. Just like she said those words to me back in her bedroom.

So, I give them to her. “Yes,” I say. “I want to fuck you.”

And I don’t wait. I grip her hair tight as I cover her mouth with mine, and desire grabs me by the throat, white-hot and bright as a magnesium flare. She tastes like that night in her bed, sweet as honey, as chocolate, and this time her kiss isn’t hesitant or tentative. She kisses me back as hungrily as I’m kissing her, leaning into me, pressing her soft, warm body into mine.

My cock gets harder and I let go of her hair to slide my hands over the curve of her ass, pulling her in close, grinding against the heat between her

thighs. She shudders as I press the hard ridge of my zipper against her clit, panting against my mouth.

Mine. In this moment she's mine and I will have her.

I will have all of her.

I turn us around, so she's the one against the vanity, then I lift her up onto the top of it. I pull off the boots she's wearing, jerk down her tights and her underwear with them, then I drop to my knees in front of her.

I don't go down on women. I'm selfish with my desires. I fuck for my own release not theirs, yet now all I can think about is how her body is mine, too. Her pussy is mine, and I want to taste it. I want to make her scream, because her orgasms are also mine.

"Lucien," she gasps. "What are you—"

I flip the hem of her dress up, grab her thighs and pull her to the edge of the vanity. She resists at first, but when I spread her legs and throw them over my shoulders on either side of my head, she takes a shuddering breath and her muscles relax.

Her pussy is right in front of me, all silvery curls and soft pink flesh. She's wet already and my mouth waters. She smells like heaven and I bet she'll taste even better.

I flick a glance up at her, meeting her darkened eyes. There's uncertainty in them, but her face has gone as pink as her pussy.

"No one's ever tasted this pretty cunt, have they?" I ask her, my voice deep and rough with hunger.

I'm expecting her to lie the way she did in her bedroom that night, but she only shakes her head, breathing fast.

I grip her thighs tightly. "And who's is it?"

She's breathing even faster now, her eyes all pupil. "I ... I..."

"Who's is it?" I repeat, insistent now. I want her to admit that she's mine, that every part of her is mine. I want to hear it. I gave her the words she wanted to hear, and now she needs to give this to me.

She's trembling as she looks down at me and then she whispers, "Yours."

The flare of triumph that burns through every part of me is out of proportion to what this is, but for once I don't question it. For once, I let myself have it.

"Yes," I say softly, fiercely. "It is."

Then I bury my face between her thighs, running the flat of my tongue up the length of her slit, holding her thighs down as she cries out, arching her back.

She tastes as sweet as I thought she would, with a tart, salty edge that only makes me want more. So, I shift my hands, use my fingers to spread her open like a flower, and then I begin to explore; licking, nipping, stroking her with my tongue.

Her thighs tremble and she shudders, her gasps echoing in the small bathroom, then her fingers thread into my hair as if she needs something to hold onto. It feels good when she pulls on it, little prickles of pain sharpening everything, so I return the favour, kissing the insides of her thighs, sucking on her skin, adjusting my grip yet again, so I can pinch her, give her some pain.

She wails as I do so, and when I pinch a second time, my tongue pushing into her pussy, she jerks, her hips moving helplessly. I keep going, working her up, licking her clit before pinching it, then licking at it again.

Words fall out of her mouth, soft pleas then demands, then my name, over and over again. It sounds like music to me, like prayers, and I'm the god she's praying to, and with her writhing in my grip, I feel like one.

But a god has his own needs and I'm impatient, so with one last lick and pinch, I send her over the edge, her screams bouncing off the walls as I taste the sweetness of her orgasm on my tongue.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ASTRID

I lean back against the bathroom wall, still shaking from the aftershocks of the orgasm Lucien's just given me. My thighs are trembling, my pussy still pulsing as he lifts his head from between my legs.

His eyes burn, a tiger's hunger glittering in them, and every part of me tightens. I might be done, but he isn't.

He's wrecked me, though, with his tongue and the grip of his hands, with his teeth and the rough nips and pinches, giving me the sweet edge of pain to make everything burn so bright.

A dim part of me notes that I'll probably have bruises on my inner thighs at some point, but I don't care. I want those bruises. I want his marks. He told me that I was his; and God help me, but I want to be.

My legs are still spread apart, my pussy exposed as he slowly gets to his feet, straightening to his full height and gazing down at the wreck he's made of me. There's a taut expression on his face, yet I see the spark of satisfaction in his eyes. He's pleased that he did this to me. He likes me spread open and helpless from the pleasure he gave me.

He scoops me up in his arms and turns, striding out of the bathroom with me held against his chest, heading for the living room. He's warm and

hard, and he smells of darkness and disinfectant, and I can hear the beat of his heart, strong and steady.

I can't stop shaking, but it's the aftershocks and the anticipation of what he's going to do now. Of how else he's going to wreck me, and how I'll let him, because even though I thought I was done, I'm not.

I want more of him. I want more of this. I don't know what will happen afterwards, but I'm not going to think about it now. I'm with him now.

In the living room, he deposits me onto the floor in front of the fire. "On your knees," he orders, dark and rough. "Time to return the favour, Tinkerbelle. Your mouth is mine and I'm going to own it."

My mouth? What? Oh. Right.

My heart pounds, my breathing accelerating. Blow jobs have always sounded vaguely distasteful to me, but now I'm trembling all over and my pussy is throbbing at the thought of his hard demand, and I'm sinking to my knees before I'm even conscious of it.

He takes my hair in one of his fists and holds on as he flicks open the top button of his jeans, pulling down the zipper of his fly with the other. The hard ridge of his cock pushes against the black cotton of his briefs, and my mouth waters. He's a delectable treat waiting for me. He reaches down and frees himself, one hand gripping his shaft. The sight of the tattoos on his fingers as they curl around his cock is so erotic that a wave of hunger hits me, so strong I'm almost panting.

"I haven't done this before," I say huskily, needing to tell him so he doesn't expect me to blow his mind along with his dick.

He's so tall, towering over me, his hand tight in my hair. I'm totally at his mercy and yet his hard cock is a testament to the fact that maybe he's at mine.

"I know you haven't." His voice is rough, guttural. "I'll tell you what to do. Now. Open up."

I do it, holding his gaze as he guides his cock into my mouth, a whimper escaping as I taste him. He's salty, his skin hot and smooth, and my heartbeat is loud in my ears. He pushes in slowly, watching me as I take him, going deeper and I groan helplessly.

"Suck me," he orders and I close my lips around him, trembling as he draws his hips back, sliding his cock out then in again, even deeper this time.

I can't believe how good he tastes and it's such a turn on to watch the flame in his eyes burn hotter and hotter. His cock is long and wide, and with his next thrust the head brushes the back of my throat, making my eyes water. The discomfort only makes me wetter.

"Too much?" he asks, watching me intently.

I shake my head, blinking furiously, possessed by the sudden urge to take him even deeper, prove myself to him some way, show him that I'm not the scared little virgin I was a couple of nights ago. And maybe I *will* blow his goddamned mind after all.

"Good." The word is even rougher. "Then take more." And he thrusts deeper, a moan vibrating in the back of my throat as he does so.

This is trust, I can't help but think. The most vulnerable part of him is in my mouth and I could hurt him, really hurt him if I wanted to. But he's trusting me not to do that, whether he understands that or not, and the thought makes me glow inside like a light being switched on.

I raise my hands and grip his powerful thighs to steady myself, and I give him the edge of my teeth, just lightly along the side of his cock, then swirl my tongue around the head. He sucks in a harsh breath, his hand in my hair painful, making my pussy throb. "Fuck," he growls. "Yes. Use your teeth."

So I do, gripping him tightly, working his shaft, sucking him hard as his thrusts get faster and faster. He's testing my gag reflex and there are tears running down the side of my cheeks as my eyes water, but I don't want him

to stop. I want to make him come the way he made me come that night in my bed. Using only my mouth. I want to undo him the way he undid me.

The look in his eyes is a bright flame and his other hand spears into my hair, holding my head steady as he continues to fuck my mouth harder and faster. "I'm going to come," he says. "And you're going to swallow every drop, understand me?"

Again, I nod, staring all the way up at him, and I see the moment he lets himself go. He doesn't hide it. His features tighten and he lets out a snarl like a tiger's as the orgasm hits him, then he empties himself down the back of my throat, and I do exactly what he told me to. I swallow every drop.

There's a moment of silence afterwards broken only by the sound of his breathing slowing, and I lean forward, my forehead pressed to the denim of his powerful thighs. I close my eyes, conscious of my own panting breaths, my mouth tender and a little bruised, the back of my throat a little raw. I ache between my legs and I'm hot, and if this is the fire that he warned me about, then I'm quite happy to burn.

I'm quite happy to kneel at the feet of the villain.

Another moment passes, then he grips my upper arms and hauls me to my feet, his gaze roaming over my face. Then he bends and kisses me as a deep, rough sound escapes the back of his throat. "I can taste myself on you," he murmurs against my lips. "Whose mouth is this?"

This time, I know what he wants.

"Yours," I whisper.

He kisses me again, harder this time, feverish almost, and before I know what's happening, he's taking me down onto the rug in front of the fire. My tights and underwear are already gone, so when he strips my dress and bra from me, I'm naked. Then he gets rid of his own clothes, grabbing a condom from the pocket of his jeans and sheathing himself.

I'm still sensitive, so when he pushes my legs apart and covers my body with his, the hard length of his cock pushing inside me, I writhe and gasp,

pushing at his hard, hot chest. “Too much,” I groan.

“You can take it,” he says roughly, pushing deeper. “I know you can.”

Fuck, yes, I want to. I want to take it, take him, take all of him, even as my nerves jangle at the push of his cock, and I shiver uncontrollably. He shifts, one hand cupping the back of my head, tilting it back so my mouth is ready for his kiss, and there is something tender in the way he holds it. Something tender in the kiss he gives me, warm and sweet. Slow and sensual as he eases deeper inside me. I tremble beneath him, caught on the delicate cusp of too much yet not enough, my nails digging into his chest.

He bites my bottom lip again, giving me pain as he fucks me deep and slow, tugging my leg up around his waist so he can slide even deeper. I grip his broad, muscular shoulders, scratching him, and he growls. And I want to put my mark on him. I want to draw blood. I want him to feel me as deeply as I feel him. His thrusts get faster and he releases my head, putting his hands flat to the floor on either side of my head, raising himself slightly as his hips flex and his cock slides in and out, a driving rhythm that makes me arch and gasp.

I grip him even tighter as he moves faster, and the feeling of too much becomes not enough, and I gasp into his ear that I need more and harder, please, harder. But he knows what I need.

He finds my nipple with a thumb and forefinger, and he twists it viciously hard as he ups the pace, driving into me as if he’s trying to hammer me into the ground.

The pain is a nuclear bomb detonating inside me, incinerating me, giving the pleasure of an edge so sharp that cuts me to pieces from the inside. I come hard, screaming as the climax bursts apart inside me, and then I hear his roar of release as he follows.

Then there is nothing but silence.

Chapter Twenty-Six

LUCIEN

I lie on top of her, utterly spent, the hot clutch of her cunt pulsing around my cock. I don't want to move. I want to stay here like this, with her softness beneath me and the aftershocks of that orgasm still echoing through me.

Is this what peace feels like? Or maybe even ... contentment? I don't know, I've never experienced either, but those words mean something and maybe it's the something that I'm feeling now, a soft silence filled with nothing at all.

You can never have peace. Not when you're still his.

The thought is as sharp as the nylon garotte in my leather jacket, a reminder that I still have a mission to complete and orders to follow. That I'm wasting time fucking a woman I should be doing other things with, such as dragging her out to see her friend and using her to pump him for information.

But for the first time in my life, I ignore the whisper in my head, the imperative that's always driving me on. I have time to sate myself with Astrid, and why not? Perhaps if I do so, this strange chokehold she has me in will finally release, and I can get on with doing what I was ordered to do.

Lazarus doesn't need that information right this minute, and Enzo doesn't need his justice in the next couple of hours.

I have time, so I'm going to take it.

After a moment, I shift, pulling out of her slowly. She makes a small sound of protest and shudders as I do so. It's delicious, that sound, so I brush my mouth against hers just to taste it.

Next, I deal with the condom, then find myself hunting around for a blanket, which is ludicrous. I've never wanted to wrap someone in a blanket before, so why I'm even considering it now, I have no idea. But she's naked and the room still has a chill in the air. I find what I'm looking for in a box under the windows. It's a bit musty, but it's warm.

I carry it over to her, wrap her up in it, carry her over to the couch, and sit down with her in my lap. Her head rests against my chest, her long pale hair flowing over my arm, brushing against my skin. It's like silk.

Why am I doing this? Why am I sitting here with her in my lap? I've never felt even the slightest urge to hold a woman in my arms, and yet that's exactly what I'm doing. As if I can't bear not to keep touching her.

I lean back against the couch and look down at her. She says nothing and doesn't move, her lashes resting on her flushed cheeks. Her warm weight feels good against me, and abruptly, I'm tired of questioning myself and what I'm doing. I'm tired of constantly checking for threats and weaknesses, scanning myself for vulnerabilities.

It doesn't matter why I want to hold her in my arms and examine what's mine. What matters is that in this moment, I can. I can indulge myself. I can allow myself this, without it meaning anything.

So, I let myself study her, mesmerised by her long lashes and how they flutter every so often as if she's trying to open her eyes, but doesn't. She's so relaxed and so warm, and I realise with a sudden jolt, that she's fallen asleep in my arms.

My chest tightens. I'm a stone-cold killer that she knows nothing about, yet she's fallen asleep on me as if I'm safe. As if she trusts me. I can't imagine it. I can't imagine trusting another person so implicitly that you'd allow yourself to be unconscious in their presence.

I scan her sleeping face. Is this what trust looks like? Her in my arms, fast asleep? She shouldn't trust me. I'm not safe. I'm still planning on using her to get information out of her friend and I wonder if she's thought of that. Perhaps she has, considering she's smart. Perhaps she has and doesn't care.

She sighs and shifts like a cat getting more comfortable, and I don't want to move in case I wake her. I like her lying on me, so I sit there, indulging myself by looking at her face and studying its contours in a way I can't do when she's awake.

She looks so very young, her skin smooth and clear. Her mouth is full and red from my kisses, especially her bottom lip, and her chin is sharp and determined. She has a tiny white scar near her top lip, a delicate little half-moon. Everything about her is delicate. You'd never know that not ten minutes earlier, she was lying beneath me as I slammed into her, her nails scratching my back like a lioness on heat.

I push a lock of hair from her forehead and allow myself to imagine, just for a moment, what it would be like to actually have someone. Someone to kiss and to hold. Someone I could go to sleep with every night and wake up with every morning. I can't imagine it, though, because it's not something I've ever had, nor ever will. Normal relationships are for other people, not for me.

The fire burns down and I stare into the flames for far too long. A chill settles over the room, and I know I'm going to have to move to keep things warm. So, I force myself to end the moment, to ease her from my lap and settle her on the couch still wrapped in her blanket, then I pull on my jeans,

before crouching before the fire to add some more wood from the stack beside the hearth.

The safe house is stocked with everything we might need. Wood and nonperishable food items in the pantry. Spare ammo and a few guns in a safe in a shed out the back. Batteries and candles. Everything a good safe house or doomsday bunker needs.

I start thinking of practical matters, such as what food to prepare, because she'll probably be hungry when she wakes up, and God knows I am, especially after our exertions.

I throw one last log into the fire and then rise to my feet, turning in the direction of the kitchen and glancing at Sleeping Beauty on the couch.

She's no longer sleeping, though. She's awake, her eyes wide and dark as she watches me, the flames of the fire reflected in her gaze.

Electricity moves over my skin, a hard jolt that knocks loose something inside me. But I don't know what it is or what it means so I ignore it.

"Disappointing," I say. "I didn't even get to kiss you awake."

She smiles, like the smile she gave me in the bathroom, and the electricity jolts me even harder. Again, I ignore it.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to go to sleep." Her voice is husky, and I have an insane urge to pull her into my arms and tell her to go back to sleep, that I'll be her pillow.

But no. The moment for that has passed.

"Don't apologise," I say. "You earned the nap."

Her smile deepens and her cheeks flush at the reminder, and for a second that's all I can see. Her sitting on the couch, naked and wrapped in a blanket, smiling at me.

The silence lengthens, and along with the electricity, something heavy and portentous hangs in the air. And slowly it comes to me that this isn't just a fuck. It's not even two. It's more than physical. Somehow, she's

gotten under my skin, and now I'm wrapping her in blankets, wanting to make her food, wanting to make her smile...

She's a liability now. She's your weakness.

Fuck.

"Are you hungry?" The question is brusque as I rise to my feet. "I was going to check out the pantry and see what there is to eat."

"Oh, uh ... sure," she says, her smile fading at my curt tone. "That would be great."

It feels as if the sun has gone behind a cloud, leaving everything darker and colder, and she must feel it, too, because she says, "Lucien? Did I ... say something wrong?"

I should tell her that no, of course she didn't say anything wrong, that the wrongness is me, that I'm the issue, but I don't.

"I'll get us some dinner," I say, then turn and head into the kitchen without a word.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

ASTRID

Lucien vanishes through a doorway down one end of the room, while I sit on the couch feeling suddenly cold.

I can't believe I went to sleep on him, but after that last orgasm, I was so warm and relaxed and sated, that when he wrapped me up in a blanket and sat me in his lap on the couch, a wave of tiredness crept up on me. His chest was hot and his arms were around me, and I could hear his heartbeat. That steady beat along with the crackle of the flames in the hearth was so soothing and I just...

Stupid to fall asleep in a killer's arms. Stupid to give him a blowjob and have sex with him. Stupid to feel as if there's something more between us than physical attraction.

I know he wants me, but that moment after I woke up, where I saw him crouched before the fireplace, wearing only his jeans, the firelight flickering over his tattooed body, all carved muscle, tanned skin and black ink, and I... God, he was so beautiful my heart felt bruised.

Then he turned and noticed me staring and said that lovely thing about kissing me awake, which was so unexpected that I smiled at him. I couldn't stop myself. I forgot who and what he was in that moment, because in that

moment he was only Lucien. The man who let me clean up his cut, and who gave me pleasure, who told me I was his. Who knows my secrets and who let me sleep in his arms.

Just Lucien.

Then the atmosphere changed – why, I don’t know – and a shadow crossed his face, the burning, fierce look in his eyes snuffing out. He wasn’t just Lucien then. He was Lucien the killer, who turned and strode into the kitchen without a backward glance.

That shouldn’t have hurt. That shouldn’t have made me feel as if I’d done something wrong, yet it did. And I feel stupid now, as if I’ve betrayed myself. As if a part of me has been hoping that the sex we just had changed things. He wrapped me in a blanket, then held me in his arms while I slept. Does that happen in a “just sex” relationship? Do killers even look after you?

Not that we have any kind of relationship, and I have to keep reminding myself of that. He said I was his, but he hasn’t said what that means and I don’t know where we go from here.

Wolf, my friend, is still his prisoner, and guilt at forgetting about that jabs at me. And Lucien still wants that information about Dad, but I still have no idea who he is, apart from the fact that he’s clearly involved in organised crime of some sort.

It’s a mess. My whole damn life is a mess, and it’s all because of him.

Like it wasn’t a little fucked up to begin with.

I ignore the thought as I pull the blanket tighter around me, the wool prickling against my bare skin. There’s no point going over all of this again; and thinking about it endlessly is only making my head hurt, so I stare at the fire until Lucien comes out of the kitchen with two steaming bowls.

His expression is back to being stone again as he hands me a bowl. “The pantry only has nonperishables and instant food. This is the best I could do.”

The bowl is full of ramen, and there's a fork, and suddenly I'm ravenous.

"I don't care." I grab the fork and dig in. "I'm a college student, remember? I love ramen."

After that, we eat in silence, but I can't resist glancing at him every now and then. He's not looking at me, but at the fire, staring into the flames as if the answer to life itself is somehow contained in them. His features are outlined in gold. The straight line of his nose and his winged black brows. High cheekbones, strong jaw and beautifully carved mouth. He looks like an angel, a fallen angel, and I still feel an echo of shock that such a gorgeous man wants a plain old college student like me.

"See something interesting?" he asks, still staring into the fire.

I blush at being caught staring. "No, I just ... wondered what you were thinking."

He glances at me. "Why do you want to know?" His tone is still pretty neutral, but there's an edge to it.

My heart constricts. I don't want his mood to affect me, but it is and I don't like it. "Well, you're clearly annoyed," I say, trying to keep the sharp note from my voice. "So what is it? Is it me?"

For a second, he holds my gaze, and something dark flickers there, something that makes a cold shiver pass over my skin. Then he puts his untouched bowl down on the floor and turns back to me. "You want the truth?" he says. "Yes, it's you."

A needle of hurt goes through me. "Why?" I can't help asking. "What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything, Astrid." His gaze is dark. "But you need to understand that what's happening between us, now, here, is all there is. I can't give you anything more than that."

The needle of hurt works deeper, even though I've been telling myself all this time that of course what's between us can't go anywhere. "So, you

were lying when you said I was yours?”

“No.” The word is hard and certain. “I meant it. But the rules of my world mean that I can’t have anything of my own.”

My throat constricts. “What world? Your crime world?”

He glances away, toward the fire. “You’re a vulnerability. If anyone knows I’ve been sleeping with you, you’ll become a target.”

My heart aches as a cold shiver of foreboding ripples over my skin. “That man you killed in the parking lot. He’s part of it, isn’t he?”

Lucien lets out a short, hard laugh. “You’re too smart for your own good, Tinkerbelle.”

He’s still not admitting anything, but I know I’m right. “Who was he? Why did he want to take me to Dad?” I stare at Lucien’s beautiful face. “He targeted me the way you did. Was it for the same reason?”

Lucien is still looking at the fire, firelight playing over his features. “The MC’s operation is attractive. Lots of people want it for themselves.”

I feel even colder. This should worry me, this should be making me head straight home and inform my father, yet all I can feel is the hurt sitting like a piece of broken glass inside me.

“You want it, too, don’t you?” I ask, even though I already know. “Is that why you fucked me? Is that why you—”

“No.” His voice falls over mine like an iron bar, cutting me off, the familiar blue flame of his hunger burning in his eyes. “I fucked you, because I wanted you, Astrid. Not for any other reason.”

It’s stupid how that eases the hurt, sands off the sharp edges of that piece of glass. I did want him to want me. I wanted him to want me the way I want him.

“But,” he goes on. “I did target you. I put those cameras in your house and in your father’s office at the station. I put spyware on your phone so I could track you. I decided you were the key to getting the information I needed.”

This is not news to me. Of course he targeted me, that's why he approached me on the beach that day, why he followed me around on campus, and blackmailed me into going for a drink with him. The spyware on my phone I had no idea about, though.

"But I didn't have it," I say.

His eyes glitter as he stares at me. "No, and I still need it."

"I really was going to talk to Dad tonight," I say, and it's the truth, though it wasn't for his sake. It was for mine. "I can still talk to him."

"Or I could take you into the shed where your friend is and put a little pressure on him to spill his guts." His voice is almost casual as he talks about potentially torturing me, and maybe even a week ago, I would have been terrified.

But I'm not terrified. He threatened to do the same with Dad and he didn't. He won't do it now, either. I don't know why I'm so sure of that, not when he hasn't given me any reason to be, yet I am.

"No, you won't," I say quietly, clearly.

For a long second, we stare at each other, then finally he says, "Why do you trust me? Because you do, don't you?" There's a note of genuine puzzlement in his voice now. "You fell asleep on me, like you knew I wouldn't hurt you."

He looks baffled by this, and I think I understand why. In his mind he's a killer, and if his world is as dangerous as he implies, then trust must be a very rare commodity.

I lift a shoulder. "I don't know," I say honestly. "I just... You didn't do what you threatened to do with Dad, though you could have. And you didn't kill Wolf, though again, you could have."

"Mistakes," he says, dismissive. But his gaze is pinned to mine as if he wants me to keep going, to give him some insight.

Not for the first time, I wonder what kind of life he must have if simple human emotions like trust are such a mystery to him. Then I remember the

scars on his back and how a man like him would have come by those scars. Someone must have hurt him and hurt him badly.

My heart tightens, though I have no idea why I should care, or why I'm even thinking about those scars, and how he got them. Why I'm hurt by the knowledge that what's between us can't go anywhere.

If anything, I should be scared. I don't want to be anyone else's target but his, after all. But again, all that seems to matter to me is him.

"I've never been afraid of you," I say. "Perhaps I was on the beach that day, but not afterwards. You pissed me off more than anything else."

His gaze roams over my face. "You have no idea who I am, though. I killed a man in front of you, I slit his throat then I kissed you, got his blood all over you."

"I know," I say. "But you didn't kill me, did you?"

"That's a very low bar."

He's not being funny, but I can't help smiling, despite everything else. "True," I say. "You're dangerous, and yet ... I don't think you're dangerous to me."

But that's a lie, isn't it? He is dangerous to you.

The piece of glass sitting inside me, that little piece of hurt, shifts and I know that's the truth. He *is* dangerous to me, though not physically. It's more how he makes me feel and how he sees me, and how he doesn't judge me.

He says nothing for a long moment, then raises one hand to cup my cheek. His palm is warm and I can't help but lean into it. "I have orders, Tinkerbell," he says softly. "Orders I have to follow, because if I don't, I won't ever be free."

My chest tightens. He's given me a little piece of himself, hasn't he? A small truth that means something to him, I can hear it in his voice.

"Free?" I echo. "Free of what?"

He brushes his thumb over my cheekbone. "Everything."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

LUCIEN

There are so many things I shouldn't be doing and giving her that truth about myself is just one more. But I wanted her to have it. I can't tell her anything else and she deserves to have something of me. Especially after everything she's told me, everything she's trusted me with.

And I was right about that. She does trust me. She has no guarantee that I won't take her to her friend, torture or even kill them both, but she's absolutely confident that I won't.

I don't know why she thinks that, and while her reasons make a certain kind of sense, I still don't understand. I didn't follow through on my threat to her father, and I let her friend live, but those were decisions I made in the moment. In another moment, I could change my mind. I hate loose ends as much as Enzo does.

She's not a loose end.

That's the truth of it, the bare truth. The truth I've been trying to ignore. She's not a target or a loose end. She's not just a fuck. She's a woman who for some reason has put her trust in me, and whether I want it to or not, that means something to me. It makes me want to keep it, be worthy of it.

There's concern in her grey eyes now, a crease between her fair brows. Her cheek is warm against my palm and I want her again. "What do you mean, everything?" she asks.

Free of Enzo. Free of my oath. Free to make decisions. Free to want things I'm not supposed to want. Free of the world I grew up in.

But I can't tell her that, not without revealing everything I'm supposed to keep secret. Because I'm not free, not yet.

So, I ignore her question. "You need to get me that information you promised," I say instead. "And you need to get it to me tonight."

She blinks, then draws back, sitting very straight on the couch. "No," she says calmly. "Not until you tell me what you want it for."

"I can't," I say. "I made promises to people and I can't break them."

"Promises to who?"

She's relentless, isn't she? I'd admire it if it wasn't so annoying. Her stubbornness is going to get her into trouble, though, and I shouldn't be encouraging it. Except she's worried for her father. She's protective of him. Maybe if she knows he won't be killed, that would help.

"I can't tell you that, either. But what I can say is that we need your father to stay alive."

Her eyes narrow. "We?"

I say nothing.

"Will you hurt him?"

I let out a breath. "I will try not to, though I can't speak on behalf of anyone else."

She isn't encouraged by this, clearly, since her expression remains tight. "And if I say no?"

We're back to this again. This and her certainty that I won't use her, and I'm almost shocked to discover that she's right. The thought of hurting her to get what I want, the thought of hurting anyone she cares about is ... distasteful. No, more than that, it's wrong. I can't do it.

But someone else might.

A dark thread winds through me, tightening my muscles, stirring that possessive beast inside me. If I don't get that intel for Lazarus, he'll get someone else to do it. One of his lowly soldiers perhaps or he might even handle it himself, and I ... can't allow that.

She's my target. She's mine. And that information belongs to me.

The beast growls, restless, and abruptly, I push myself to my feet and pace over to the fire. This is a problem. It's a real fucking problem.

I don't want to hurt her, but I can't allow anyone else to hurt her. Yet if we want to keep the gun-running operation going, we need the police to keep away and stay away. There must be another way to do this that doesn't involve Astrid, and yet ... we need to keep Chief Starling where he is, and she's the perfect leverage to do so. She's the key. We need her.

"What if ... what if you didn't do this." Her voice from behind me is soft. "What if we just got into Matilda and drove away?"

An easy solution, and nothing I haven't thought myself a hundred times already. But there's no escaping Enzo. No escaping the Tribunal, not when you've given them your oaths. They'll hunt you down to the ends of the earth, the way they hunted my parents. The way they're hunting the rest of my family.

The way you're helping them.

Yes, in exchange for my freedom, for leaving this all behind the way Astrid suggests. But I can only do that with Tribunal approval, and I don't have it yet.

"That's not possible," I say, staring at the fire. "The people I work for have strict rules about oath-breakers. It doesn't matter how far or how fast we run, they would hunt us down eventually. They'd kill you first to punish me, and then they'd kill me. If I was lucky."

She's silent a moment, then she says, "If anyone could escape, it would be you."

Naïve Tinkerbell. She has no idea of the lengths they go to. Even twenty years after my parents died, Enzo is still hunting Lazarus, Killian and Thea. He'll never stop.

"Say if I did." I watch the flames leap, consuming the wood. "If I stopped working for them. They'd kill me, which is fine. I'm not afraid of death. But someone else will take my place, and they won't care about you, Astrid. They will hurt you to get to your father, believe me."

There's another long silence as the flames crackle and the wood pops, sap burning.

"So, what you're saying is that someone will eventually get that information from me, and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

I've never questioned my orders, never gone against them. I do what I'm told, I'm a weapon, and a weapon isn't supposed to have emotions. But now my gut tightens as an impotent kind of fury grips me.

There's no way out of this, not for her and not for me.

"No." I say. "There isn't."

"Okay." This time her voice is so soft I almost don't hear it. "I'll do it."

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

ASTRID

A sharp pain lodges in my chest as I say the words, but I don't take them back. He has oaths like Wolf, and while I might find them stupid, he doesn't. And clearly with the threat of violence and death hanging over him, maybe they're not so stupid after all.

Perhaps a couple of weeks earlier I would have laughed at the drama of it, but that was before he came into my life. Before a man attacked me and Lucien slit his throat. I don't know anything about the other pieces on Lucien's board, but I know the game he's playing is real.

So no, we can't just drive away, and he can't not follow his orders. And even if he does, someone else will come to threaten me, hurt me, and they really will cut pieces off me. That's ... worrying, I'll admit, but it's more Dad I'm concerned about. I don't want him to have to witness that, so maybe it would be better if I asked the questions. Perhaps it would hurt less if he talked to me, rather than some violent killer with a knife?

You still don't have to give Lucien the information.

No, that's true. I don't.

Slowly, Lucien turns from the fire and looks at me, the flames leaping behind him. He could be a demon straight from hell with his broad

shoulders, muscled chest and the tattoos that wind around him. But he's not looking at me like a demon would. I can't tell exactly what glitters in his eyes now, but it looks like surprise and not a little regret.

"Why?" he asks.

I let out a breath. "Because you said someone would get it out of him anyway. So isn't it better that he talk to me rather than anyone else? It would certainly be quicker and less complicated, right?"

"You said that it was difficult to talk to him."

"Yes, I mean, we don't have a close relationship." I swallow. "He ... kind of pulled away from me when I got older, and I don't know why. Perhaps because I look like my mom or something, I'm not sure what... But anyway, I can try. I'd rather be the one in control of that conversation than someone else."

He stares at me, the fire flickering over the tattoos on his shoulders. "You shouldn't do this for me, Astrid."

I lift my chin. "I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for Dad. Anyway, you left Wolf alive for me."

Slowly, Lucien comes toward me, prowling like a tiger. There's something fierce in his eyes now, something I've never seen before, and makes my breath catch. "Like I said," he murmurs, "I can't promise your father won't be hurt."

"I know." I steel myself. "But you said you needed him alive, so that's enough for me."

"I can't make the same promise about your friend, you know that, don't you?"

My gut dips at the thought of Wolf. Still trapped in whatever shed Lucien put him in. "You said you wouldn't kill him—"

"I said I wouldn't kill him back at the parking lot," he interrupts. "But he's an officer of the club. An enforcer. And the club is not going to go

quietly. There will be blood, Astrid. There will be casualties, and I can't guarantee your friend won't be one of them."

The balloon in my chest, which has been dormant since I got here, begins to inflate again, pressing against my already tight heart. I know that joining a club like Wolf's puts you in harm's way, I know that. He must know that, too.

But I don't want him to die, and getting this information to Lucien will likely put him in danger. Then again, he's in danger already, isn't he? As Lucien says, one way or another, the club is going down, and maybe Wolf with it.

Unless I warn him, of course.

I take a silent breath as I turn the thought over in my head. It would mean telling Wolf about Lucien, and he'll probably have a lot of questions about him. Then again, it's not as if he doesn't know now considering he heard Lucien's name just before Lucien knocked him unconscious.

No, the cat's well and truly out of the bag, so I could definitely give him a heads up that his club is at risk. He might not believe me, he might even want proof, and I don't have any proof, except for Lucien's presence. But that might be enough. Not that he can go anywhere since Lucien has him locked up.

I stare at Lucien standing in front of me, muscled arms crossed over his broad chest. "What are you going to do with him?"

"I will handle it."

"How? You said you wouldn't kill him in the parking lot, but that implies you might kill him later."

The breath goes out of him. "No," he says, and there's something like weariness in his voice. "No, I won't kill him. But like I said, there are other people who will."

The balloon inside me inflates more, pressing against my ribs and making everything inside me ache. "Let him go, then."

“He’ll warn the club. I can’t allow that.”

“What about if I told him that you were a stalker?” I say, frantically trying to think of some way I can get Wolf out of that shed. “That you’ve been following me, which is true. He’d tell the club and they’ll look for you, but like you said, you won’t be found if you don’t want to be.”

Lucien is silent, his expression as unreadable as ever. “He’s a loose end.”

“So? I’m a loose end, too, right? I know your name. I know what you look like. Once you’ve got your information, I won’t be needed anymore.” I don’t know why I’m telling him this, since it’s nothing he wouldn’t have thought himself.

“I won’t hurt you, Astrid.” The hard edges of his voice soften slightly. “You’re not a loose end I want to tie up.”

“And neither is Wolf,” I say, deciding to push. “Let him go. For me.”

Lucien’s expression tightens.

“I’ll tell him you brought me here,” I go on. “And that I managed to get away from you, and now he’s free, he has to take me home. Once I’m home, I’ll talk to my dad. You’ll get your information tonight, I promise.”

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Chapter Thirty

LUCIEN

I don't want to let the Hound go, not given how much of a threat he is. Then again, keeping him prisoner for some indefinable length of time isn't practical, either. The best answer is to take him out, but I've already decided I can't do that.

I can't do that to her, and it's strange to be concerned about another person, but ... I am. If I don't want to hurt her, then I can't hurt anyone she cares about, either.

Also, she's offering to talk to her father, without me threatening her, without getting anything for herself out of it. I understand why she did it. Regardless of what happens between us, Enzo wants the MC's operation, so pressure will be applied to the chief one way or another. It's better if it's her. Easier, too. Though, that's not why there's something ... tight in my chest. Why it feels as if she's giving me a gift.

She said it wasn't for me, but I know it is.

She's betraying her father for me, so how can I not let her friend go free? She's not holding anything over me, there's no threat of blackmail, nothing like that, but ... I want to do it. I want to give her something more than just one truth.

I've never actually wanted to give anyone anything before.

Her expression is tight as she looks at me, and I recognise it. She's worried for her friend, desperate almost, and her hand has crept to her chest where the blanket covers her, and she's rubbing gently, as if trying to relieve an ache.

I want to go over to the couch, pull her hand away and the blanket along with it, and give her what she really wants, some pain to let out those fears of hers and that pressure. Ignore her question for now in favour of fucking her senseless just one more time.

Because it will be only one more time.

Something hollows inside me. If I agree to free her friend, I will have to free her, too. And once she's free, once she talks to her father and finds out what I need to know, I won't need her anymore. No one will need her anymore.

I don't know why that feels close to painful. Yes, she's mine, but it's only here that I've claimed her. None of this can last outside these walls, not given who I am and who she is.

You have to get rid of her if you're feeling like this.

I tear my gaze from her and turn around to face the flames again. Another first. I was always good at hiding my emotions. So good in fact that I believed I didn't have any at all, but ... that's what she sees in me, that I can't see myself. She sees emotions in me that I thought were long gone, and that's just not possible. I can't allow it. I'm still not free, and until I am, those emotions will have to be cut out of me yet again.

You have to start with her.

The flames leap and crackle, yet more pops coming from the logs.

"Lucien?" she says into the silence.

Yes, I have to start with her. She's the one who's changing me, making me feel things I shouldn't feel, compromising me. She has to be cut out, because until she is, I can't do my job.

“Yes,” I say, gazing down into the flames. “I’ll free him. You can get him to take you home, tell him a story about how I stalked you. Then talk to your father.”

She lets out an audible breath, and I hear the rustle of the blanket, a few soft footfalls, and she’s coming up behind me. Her arms slide around my waist, her fingers clasped over my stomach. Then I feel more soft warmth against my back as she lays her cheek on my skin. “Thank you,” she breathes. “Thank you, Luc.”

My chest tightens at the thread of real gratitude in her voice and the way she shortens my name. As if she knows me. As if I’m her friend. This embrace feels next to painful, because I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve her thanks, not given what I’ve done to her already. Nevertheless, she’s giving it to me as if she means it, and I know she does.

Christ. I need to get rid of her before she unravels me completely.

I reach down and grab her hands still clasped on my stomach and pull them away. Then I step out of her embrace and turn around.

She stands in front of me, the blanket drawn around her, skin lit pink and gold by the flames, the same colours lighting her pale hair. That crease is back between her brows. She’s picked up on my mood.

“Get dressed,” I say shortly.

Her eyes widen. “Wait. What?”

“You asked me to let him go, so I’m letting him go.”

“Now?”

I shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans to stop from reaching for her. “Yes, now.”

“But...” She trails off, searching my face. “We can leave it another hour surely?”

The thing in my chest, a tight, coiled ache pulses like a raw wound. She doesn’t want to go, not yet, and I don’t want her to, either. But I have to cut her out at some point and it’s better now than later.

Later, I might not be able to cut her out at all.

“I don’t think so,” I say, keeping my voice cool.

She blinks as though I’ve dealt her a blow. “Lucien, I—”

“You wanted to free your friend, didn’t you?” I interrupt, needing this conversation to be over. “Put your clothes on and I’ll give you the key to the padlock.”

She doesn’t move, only stares at me. “Is this it, then? You and me?”

“There is no you and me.”

“You said I was yours. You said—”

“I know what I said.” I can’t prevent the harsh edge from entering my voice. “Yes, you’re mine. While you’re here. But we can’t stay here, Astrid. I have a mission and you have your studies, and those two things are mutually incompatible.”

Emotions flicker over her expressive face, a bright, clear hurt, and I’m moving before I can stop myself, closing the distance between us, then taking her flushed face between my palms. “I’m sorry,” I say, softening the words, letting her see in my eyes that I mean it. “If I was a different man I would have a different answer for you, but I’m not. You have your responsibilities, and so do I.”

She stares up at me, the flames painting warm colours over her pretty pale skin. She doesn’t bother to hide that this upsets her, hurts her. She lets me see it. “But surely, we can see each other again. This isn’t goodbye completely, right?”

I want to pull her close, cover that pretty, lush mouth with mine. Tear away the blanket, push her down onto the floor and fuck us both into unconsciousness. Forget everything just for one night, and maybe even for more, but I can’t.

Enzo is waiting, and so is my freedom, and I can’t give that up. Not even for her.

I open my mouth to tell her that it's over, but before I can, she whispers, "No, don't say it. Please."

So, I don't. Instead, I bend my head and brush my mouth over hers in one last kiss, soft this time, gentle, and I want more than anything to kiss her deeper, harder, but the answer to her question is yes, this is goodbye.

I lift my head, force myself to release her, then I step back. "Get dressed, Tinkerbell," I say, my voice carefully expressionless. "Your friend is waiting for you."

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Chapter Thirty-One

ASTRID

Lucien turns, grabs his T-shirt and hoodie and vanishes through the doors to the kitchen without a word, leaving me standing by the fire getting colder and colder. There's an ache in my heart, a kind of grief, which I don't understand, because why should I feel grief about the loss of something I never had in the first place?

We had sex and it blew my mind, but it's over now. Like he said, we have different responsibilities, and while his are very different from mine, it's obvious they're not ones he can set aside easily. Also, seriously, the college girl and the killer? How would anything between us even work? Then there's the whole thing with the MC and Dad, and whoever Lucien is working for. We're on completely different sides of that little scenario, however it plays out.

Yet no matter how I rationalise it, I can't get rid of that throb inside me, that ache. I know I don't know him, that I have no idea of who he is, not really, but he sees me in a way no one else ever has. He sees the dark pieces of me, the fucked-up pieces, the pieces that no one knows about except him, and he doesn't flinch from them. He accepts them. No, more than that, he *likes* them.

He's the first person I've ever told about my mother and how difficult things are between Dad and me. The first person who saw my knife and my cuts and didn't grab the knife from me. Didn't offer to fix them for me. No, instead, he offered to give me the pain I need as if it was no big deal.

I don't know how I can give that up, yet I have no choice. Time will move on, no matter how badly I wish it didn't, and this night is going to end at some point. And I can't leave Wolf in the shed all night.

Lucien is letting me free him and I know he didn't want to do it, but he's going to, and it feels like a goodbye gift. Like that kiss he just gave me.

I touch my mouth, the warmth of his lips lingering, and I want to capture that warmth, keep it forever, but it's already fading.

I can't stand here forever wanting things I can't have and wishing things were different, so I grit my teeth, push the ache in my heart away, and turn for my clothes.

Dressing quickly, I'm just putting on my shoes, when Lucien strides into the room again. He's fully dressed, too, all his beautiful tattoos hidden away, the regret I saw in his eyes as he kissed me gone completely. His expression is the same flinty one it always is, his eyes chips of deep blue ice.

"Here," he says, holding out a key. "It's for the padlock that locks the shed door."

"Okay." I take it from him.

"Come on, I'll show you where I've stored him." He turns to the doorway without waiting for me to respond, and I follow him out into the dark, chill night.

My breath clouds the air as I walk behind him around the side of the cabin. Ahead, strangely, is a wide, overgrown lawn. The moonlight touches the tips of the grass with silver, and despite the cold, wildflowers bleached white by the same light bloom like stars.

It's so pretty that for a moment I stop, brushing my fingers over the grass, feeling the dew against my skin. Ahead of me, Lucien stops, too, and turns, obviously realising I'm not following him anymore. He raises a brow in silent question.

"Your safe house has a meadow," I say softly. "It's pretty."

He stares at me as if I've said something puzzling, then slowly comes toward me before stopping in front of me. The colour of his eyes is lost in the dark, his face all silver planes and inky shadows. "There's no time for this," he says, correctly interpreting the real reason I've stopped, which is to delay the moment where we say goodbye.

"I know," I say. "But surely we can have just one more minute?"

He says nothing for a long moment, then much to my surprise, he sits down in the grass like the graceful tiger he is. "Sit," he says. "I'll show you something."

The grass is wet, but I don't care as I sit down. Then he lies on his back, and I do the same, putting my head near his.

"Look," he says and points one tattooed finger into the sky. "That's the constellation Scorpius."

I follow the line of his finger up into the night, where the stars are glittering, all clean, bright edges, and it takes me a minute, with a couple of gentle nudges from him, to see the constellation he's talking about. "Oh," I breathe. "Yes, I can see that."

"And see that red dot? That's Antares. It's one of the biggest stars you can see with the naked eye."

I stare up at the red speck in the middle of all that black, a stillness settling inside me. "I see it."

"It's the heart of the Scorpius constellation," Lucien says softly. "The heart of the scorpion. I used to look at the stars at night when I was a kid, and I liked Antares because it wasn't like all the other stars. It was red."

My throat closes. Lucien as a little boy, looking up at the stars. I can't picture it. But this is a small piece of him, a small piece of his history and I want to hoard it like a dragon.

"It's beautiful," I say, staring up at it.

"Yes," Lucien says, his voice near my ear. "It is."

But I know he's not looking at the star, now, and when I turn my head, his dark gaze meets mine, and it feels as if supernovas explode and die in his eyes. He reaches out and brushes a fingertip over the star necklace at the base of my throat. "Perhaps this was a sign," he says softly.

"A sign?" I don't understand what he means.

His gaze lifts from my necklace and doesn't waver, not even for a second. "You have to forget about me, Astrid."

The piece of glass inside me shifts, cutting deeper, but that's one thing I can't do and won't do, because there's no forgetting Lucien Frost. "No," I say. "Sorry, that's impossible."

He searches my face for a long moment then his beautiful mouth softens just a bit. "Stubborn Tinkerbell."

I want to keep this moment. I want to freeze it in time like a dragonfly in amber. Keep it like a jewel that I can go back to again and again and polish, make it sparkle like a ruby, like Antares the red star. This moment where he's looking at me and the ice in his eyes has melted, and there's almost a smile on his lips. As if he feels for me the same thing that I feel for him. As if he knows that in a way, we're kindred spirits.

But then the moment moves on and he sits up abruptly, pushing himself to his feet. He reaches a hand down for me and I take it, letting him pull me up. I want to hold onto his hand, thread his fingers through mine one last time, but he's already released me.

"Go," he orders, the strange tenderness in his voice now gone. "The shed is at the back of the property by the fence. Also"—he holds out Matilda's keys—"you'll need these to get back into town."

I nod, but don't say anything. My throat is too tight for speech.

He turns back to the cabin, but he's only taken a few steps when he stops and turns once more. My heart suddenly beats fast and I don't know whether it's with hope or fear.

He's standing there in the moonlight, enigmatic as ever, hands in the pockets of his jeans. He's totally the killer now, isn't he? He isn't Lucien anymore. "I'll come for my information tonight. You'd better have it by the time I get there."

My stomach drops, but I force myself to nod.

Then he turns around and walks away, leaving me standing in the wet grass alone.

I keep a hard leash on my thoughts, shivering as the cold night air moves over my skin, and force myself to move, walking through the grass toward where Lucien said the shed would be. I can't think of anything but what I'm going to tell Wolf, about how Lucien was stalking me and that's how I know him. That he kidnapped me, brought us here, and I managed to get away from him, and now we need to run before he realises I'm gone.

The shed, when I get to it, is small and wooden and painted white, and there are no windows. A padlock keeps the door locked.

I approach it and take out the key, my hands shaking as I unlock the padlock and take it off the door. Then I pull open the door, only narrowly avoiding the fist that comes flying toward my face. I gasp, stumbling back on my ass as Wolf bursts out, heading straight for me.

He only stops at the last minute, the fury on his face slowly morphing into shock. "Addie?"

He's a mess. One eye is swollen shut and he has a split lip. There are bruises on his jaw and blood in his short dark hair. Blood on his knuckles, too. Probably Lucien's blood.

I push myself up from the damp ground, breathing fast. "Come on," I say quickly. "I managed to get away from him. Let's go before he notices

I'm gone."

Wolf blinks, and maybe he has concussion or something, because he doesn't move immediately. So I hurry over to him and take his elbow. "Come on," I say insistently. "We have to go now."

Automatically, he moves with me, letting me drag him toward the car. "Where are we going? What the fuck is happening?"

"I'll tell you about it in the car. First, we have to get out of here."

He doesn't protest further as we get to Matilda and I hurriedly unlock the doors. He moves toward the driver's seat, but I shake my head. "You're in no position to drive," I tell him. "Also, do you even know how to drive a stick shift?"

He mutters something about of course he knows how to drive a fucking stick shift, but gets into the passenger seat without argument. Then I get Matilda going and pull out onto the road.

"What the hell happened?" Wolf asks after a moment. "Are you okay? Did that fucker hurt you?"

"No." I clutch the steering wheel tight, trying to resist the urge for one last glance back. "He didn't touch me." I can feel the pressure of Wolf's stare, so I go on. "I was being stalked by him, and I guess that's why he showed up in the parking lot. He decided to make a move."

"He was stalking you?" There's anger in Wolf's voice. "Jesus Christ, Astrid. How long has that been going on for? Why didn't you say anything to me?"

If he's using my full name, he must be really mad. "I thought I could deal with it myself." It's not difficult to sound like I'm upset. I *am* upset. Just not for the reasons Wolf expects. "I thought if I ignored him—"

"Fuck's sake," Wolf growls. "You don't handle shit like that on your own. Did you tell your father?"

I shake my head, my attention glued to the road ahead of me. "I didn't want to worry him." Which is at least partly true.

Wolf mutters another curse. “You should have come to me if you didn’t want to tell him. That fucker could have killed you.”

“Yeah, well, he didn’t.” I finally shoot a glance at him. His expression is taut with fury, and with the bruises on his face, he doesn’t look anything like the boy I once knew or the man I’m still friends with. He looks like he belongs in Lucien’s world. “I was more worried about what he’d do to you.”

Wolf’s dark eyes glitter. “I’m fine. Nothing a couple of stitches can’t fix.” There’s a hard note in the words, one that’s unfamiliar. It sounds as if it belongs to someone else, a different man. A more brutal man. “He shouldn’t have left me alive.”

“It’s okay,” I say, my heart still racing. “I’ll tell Dad when I get home and—”

“No,” Wolf says flatly, once again cutting me off. “I failed to protect you and that’s on me. He’s mine to deal with.”

I swallow. Of course he’d blame himself. Typical Wolf. “He took you by surprise,” I say. “He didn’t give you any time to react.”

“It wasn’t surprise,” Wolf says. “He was good. He was better than me, which is saying something. Fuck, Addie. You had someone like that after you? I can’t believe you didn’t say a goddamn word.”

The force of his fury fills the car, and I grit my teeth. I knew he’d be upset with me that I didn’t say anything to him, but hopefully his anger will distract him from thinking too deeply about just who Lucien is.

Now is the time to tell him. Now is the time to warn him.

Matilda’s headlights illuminate the dark road ahead of me, the centre lines disappearing under the car as I speed toward home, taking me further and further away from Lucien.

There’s a pressure in my chest, that stupid balloon inflating, making me hurt, making me ache. I can’t think about Lucien now, I can’t. I should tell Wolf the truth, warn him that his club will be under attack, and yet the

words won't come out. There's murder in his voice, I heard it, and if he knew who and what Lucien was, he'd beat him to a pulp. Or maybe his club would beat Lucien to a pulp, but either way, I can't stand the thought of that.

No, maybe I'll talk to Dad first, figure out what's happening then I'll warn Wolf. Until then, I'll keep going with the stalker story.

"I know, I should have." I make my voice as small as possible, the sound of a woman who's just gone through a terrible ordeal. And again, it's not difficult. "I'm sorry, Wolf. Please don't blame yourself. All of this is my fault."

He lets out a breath then lays a warm hand on my knee. "Don't be stupid. It's not your fault. I'm just pissed and worried for you."

His touch is reassuring, until I remember that kiss, and then I want to pull away. But I don't want to call attention to it since it might make him say something, and I can't bear it if he does. Not now, not when I'm still thinking about Lucien's hands on my skin.

"I'm okay." I try to sound like I am. "He didn't do anything bad to me, I promise."

Wolf gives me a pat then removes his hand. "I believe you. But we're still going to go straight to the clubhouse. I'll get the brothers together and we'll pay that motherfucker a visit."

I don't want to go to the clubhouse. I don't want to answer a bunch of questions from his biker friends about Lucien, because of course there'll be questions, demands for explanations. Also, I have to talk to my father.

"I don't want to talk to anyone tonight, Wolf," I say. "Please, I just want to go home."

He's looking at me again, I can feel it, and I hope like hell he's not going to insist. But then he says, "Okay. Drop me off at the parking lot. That's where I left my bike. I'm still going to get the brothers together, though. Just so you know."

Through my relief at not having to deal with his club, there's a small flicker of worry for Lucien. But I tell myself that even if the club does go back to that cabin, Lucien will be long gone.

"Good," I say then flash him another glance, genuinely concerned about his injuries. "You should be going to the hospital. What if you have a concussion?"

He gives me a bloody smile. "Like I said, I'll be fine."

Back in Blackwater, I drop him at the parking lot, then as he gets out, he says, "I'm going to send a club member to watch your house tonight. Just in case that asshole decides to come back."

I want to protest, because Lucien is going to come back for that information and if there's a club member watching the house, they'll see him. But I can't say anything, not when I'm supposed to be scared, so I only nod and don't argue.

It's very late by the time I get home, but Dad is still up, I can hear the sound of the TV as soon as I step into the hallway.

I stay there a moment or two, trying to gather my courage for this conversation, because it's not one I ever wanted to have. But I have to do this. I have to know if my father has been corrupt all this time, turning a blind eye to the MC's gun-running operation and likely letting them get away with literal murder.

I have to know if my father has secrets as dark as mine.

Finally, I move, making myself walk to the living room doorway. Dad is sitting in his chair, watching a movie on TV.

"Hey," I say.

He glances at me and nods, then looks away. "You're up late."

"So are you."

He shrugs. "There was a movie I wanted to watch."

No, there wasn't. He's here because he can't sleep, and we both know it.

I come into the room and sit down on the couch, wondering how I'm going to approach this conversation. "I was out with Wolf. He was giving me a ride on his Harley."

Dad picks up the remote and turns the TV off, then he pushes himself out of his lounge. "Too cold for riding around on motorcycles," he says brusquely. "I'm going to bed."

"Dad," I say quickly, before I lose my nerve. "I need to talk to you."

He's nearly at the doorway, and I wonder if he'll just walk straight out, but I'm surprised when he doesn't. He stops and glances at me. His eyes are a faded blue, like old denim, and I note the salt-and-pepper grey flecks in his hair and in his five o'clock shadow. He looks older than he is, and tired, defeated almost.

My heart twists. I've let it go on too long, this distance between us. I should have said something sooner, asked him where my old dad went, and why he doesn't talk to me anymore, why he never says he loves me. But I've been too afraid of the answer. Too afraid to even broach the topic.

I still don't want to, but there's a part of me that believes that this is my fault. And that I have to fix it somehow.

"What is it?" he asks.

I decide to get straight to the point. "We need to talk about the Hellhounds."

He goes very still, his expression far too determinedly neutral.

My gut hollows as the truth settles inside me, the faint hope I didn't know was there dying. What Lucien said about him is true, isn't it? He knows about the Hellhounds' operation.

"That's police business, Addie," he says. "Not yours."

I ignore this. "I heard a rumour about the club. That there's a gun-running thing that operates out of the port, and that the police turn a blind eye."

Dad's expression changes, focuses somehow, and all of a sudden, I know I'm getting Police Chief Starling, not my father. "And where did you hear this rumour?"

I give him the same lie I gave Wolf. "It was in an online chat group. Someone said they had proof."

"I wouldn't listen to anything anyone said on the internet," Dad says, a dismissive note in his voice.

"No, I know. But ... I'm worried about Wolf." I give him a concerned look. "I don't want him to go to jail."

Dad's face is expressionless. "Don't you worry about him. He's fine."

"And I worry about you, too," I go on. "I don't like people saying that you're being paid to let it happen."

"People say a lot of things," he says. "Ignore them."

"Dad," I say softly. "I know it's true. I know they're running guns and that you let them get away with it. Is that why you don't talk to me anymore? Why you don't sleep? Why you don't look at me?" My throat closes and tears prickle behind my eyes before I can stop them. "Are you ashamed? Is that why?"

Dad is still, then he looks toward the fireplace, at the photo on the mantelpiece. Him and Mom on their wedding day. They're so young in that picture, only a little older than I am right now. Mom glows in her lacy white gown, while Dad is handsome and beaming at his new wife.

"I loved your mom," he says after a moment. "God, I loved her so much."

I blink away the tears fiercely but more come to take their place. "I know you did."

Dad is still staring at the photo. "I would have done anything for her, anything to save her."

I look down at my hands clasped in my lap, my knuckles white. He couldn't save her, though, because she didn't want the treatment while she

was pregnant. She wanted me more than a chance to survive.

“But she wanted you,” he goes on, reading my thoughts. “She didn’t want to do anything that might put you at risk.”

Everything in me tightens as I stare fiercely at my hands, bracing myself for the blow I know is going to fall. For the accusation I can see in his eyes every time he looks at me. That he lost the woman he loved and got me instead.

“I didn’t agree,” Dad says, running the knife right through me. “I wanted her to have the treatment anyway, and I was angry with her for refusing it.”

I nod as a tear drips onto the back of my hand, the pressure in my chest almost unbearable. I want to say sorry, to apologise for my very existence, and for the grief my birth put him through.

“Then you arrived,” Dad keeps on going. “And you were so perfect, and I knew that Carrie had been right all along.”

I swallow, too caught up in my grief for a few seconds to fully process what he just said. And then I do. I look up at him, blinking away the tears. “What?”

Dad’s expression is still neutral, but there’s something bleak in his eyes. “I thought it was still possible to save her after you were born,” he says. “We tried everything, every treatment we could, and found one that seemed to work. But it was expensive, so very expensive.” Slowly he moves over to the mantelpiece where the photo stands, and looks down at it. “The club had an agreement with the former chief. They paid him to look away from the goings-on in the clubhouse and at the port. When he left, and I became chief, the club naturally wanted to keep the arrangement going.” He turns to look at me. “At first, I said no, but then Sawyer said he’d pay for Carrie’s treatment if I agreed to keep the earlier understanding in place.” The neutral expression slowly eases from his face, bitter regret replacing it. “I couldn’t

refuse this time. I agreed to look the other way in return for the money for your mother's treatment."

I don't know what to say. I don't even know what to feel. Should I be relieved that Dad did this for my mother and not for his own gain? Or should I be furious that he even agreed to it in the first place. "But what about after she died?" I ask, my voice thick with tears. "What happened then?"

Dad lets out a long breath. "When she died, their leverage over me should have died with her, but it didn't. They threatened you instead."

I go cold with shock. "What?"

"If I didn't agree to keep turning a blind eye, they'd hurt you."

The cold spreads outwards, seeping through my blood like ice water. So, I'm the reason Dad lets them do whatever they want. I'm the reason my mom died, and now I'm the reason for the corruption of my father's soul.

"I could leave," I say tightly. "Head overseas, go somewhere the club can't find me."

But Dad shakes his head. "Sawyer made it very clear that it didn't matter whether you left or stayed. They'd follow you regardless."

I scrub furiously at my cheeks, wiping away my stupid tears, anger beginning to build inside me. "Why didn't you tell me about any of this?"

He ignores the angry note in my voice. "Because there was no point. It would only scare you and worry you, and I didn't want to do that."

"And Wolf?" I can't stop thinking about him. Does he know about the threat to me? Has he known all this time?

"Yes, Connor knows." Dad doesn't sound bleak this time, only tired. "He doesn't like it, obviously, but he can't go against his president. He told me he'd make sure you were safe as much as he could."

So, Wolf *did* know. All this time his club has been blackmailing my father and using my life to do it with, and he never said a fucking word to me about it.

“Don’t get angry with him,” Dad says, reading my expression. “He didn’t want to tell you for the same reasons I didn’t. Plus, he can’t do anything about it.”

My cheeks are still wet no matter how many times I wipe them, and I don’t know why I’m crying, not when I’m so angry at the same time.

I shove myself off the couch, too furious to sit still. “You didn’t think of just ... I don’t know, giving up your job and moving away?”

He shakes his head, running a tired hand through his hair. “If only it was that simple. I’m useful to Sawyer now, but if I leave, I’m no longer of use, and if I’m no longer of use, I’m a loose end that needs to be tied. And so are you.”

“So, what? They’ll kill you? They’ll kill me?”

He closes his eyes as if he can’t possibly bear another second of this conversation, but he doesn’t move. “Yes,” he says simply. “I don’t care about me. At this point, it would be a relief. But I can’t let anything happen to you.” He opens his eyes again, his gaze very direct. “I don’t want you to take responsibility for any of this. It wasn’t your choice and it’s not your fault. I’m the one who has to take responsibility for it. This happened on my watch, not yours, and I’ve made my peace with it.”

My fury burns hot and my chest is so tight I can’t breathe. I want to burst into a storm of tears. I want to howl at the moon. I want to find my knife and cut and cut and cut. I want Lucien.

But I can’t do any of those things, can’t have any of those things, not now. This is the burden Dad has been carrying all this time, and it’s been slowly and steadily crushing him. He’s being crushed right now, right in front of my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say thickly. “I’m so sorry.”

Dad finally moves, coming over to me, taking my upper arms in his hands and gripping me gently but firmly. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry for,” he says, a quiet ferocity in his voice. “Nothing, you hear me? I’m

the one who needs to apologise. I've been a terrible father and I know it. I tried, Astrid, I tried. It was easier when you were small, when all you needed was the occasional hug and a bedtime story. A Band-Aid for your cuts. But when you got older, you needed more, you needed a mother and I ... I didn't know how to talk to a teenage girl. I didn't know how to braid your hair, or talk to you about boys, or periods. Your mother should have been here and I was ... angry about it."

I look up at him and my heart aches and aches. "I thought you didn't love me anymore." My voice sounds so weak and pathetic. "I thought it was because Mom died and you were stuck with me, the kid who killed her. And I look like her and—"

"Don't you dare say that." Dad gives me a little shake. "You didn't kill her, Astrid. And I didn't get stuck with you. You were a gift she gave me. You're all I have of her. Yes, you look so much like her that it hurts sometimes, but it's a good hurt."

I can't stop crying now, but he releases me then pulls me into a hug. He hasn't hugged me for years and it only makes me cry harder, but at least he's holding me, shushing me gently, the way he used to do when I was a child.

"Listen," he says as I weep against his chest. "You should know that I haven't just accepted the situation. All the times I've been out working, some of them have been about collecting information about the club and their operation. While they're threatening you, I can't do anything with it, but I'm still collecting it. One day it'll take them down."

I nod, trying to stop crying, even though my first thoughts are what they'll do to Dad if the club finds out about this. But I assume that if they haven't found out yet, Dad will make sure they never will.

You should tell him about Lucien. Warn him about what he's going to do with the club.

Yes. I should. I have to. I can't keep it a secret any longer, not after this.

“Dad,” I say, lifting my head. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

But I don’t get the chance to speak, because just as I’m about to go on, a splintering sound comes from the hallway, and seconds later, there’s a crash.

Dad lets me go immediately, turning for one of the little side tables, going to pull open the drawer. But then the room is suddenly full of men wearing black balaclavas and brandishing guns. And they’re all pointing them at me.

From somewhere else, a shot rings out as my father turns from the drawer with a gun in his hand. But it’s too late. One of the men grabs me by the arm and before I can speak something hard crashes over my head and everything turns black.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

LUCIEN

I listen to the sound of Astrid's car gradually getting fainter and fainter until it disappears. Good. She's gone. That means I can carry on with my mission without her getting in my way.

Yet no matter how many times I tell myself that, there's an ache somewhere inside me. Her, in the grass, with her hands brushing the wildflowers, the moonlight turning her hair pure silver. I knew she was trying to delay leaving, and I shouldn't have indulged her. But I did. I allowed myself to have one last moment, lying in the grass, showing her the red star that used to fascinate me when I was a kid. All those homesick nights when I couldn't sleep, and I'd go outside and look at the sky, count the stars.

Antares, the red star, the heart of the scorpion.

I used to go into Enzo's library and he had actual hard-copy encyclopedias. A lot of what was in them was out of date, but I read them anyway, according to what I was interested in. I liked the idea of the scorpion and its red heart, all still and waiting to strike.

I don't know what possessed me to tell her. Perhaps it was only that I wanted to give her another piece of me, something that she could take with

her when she left. I shouldn't have, though.

It feels as if I've been holding something beautiful and rare in my hands, only to lose my grip on it.

But it's pointless thinking that. I can't have anything rare and beautiful, that's not possible yet. Perhaps once I'm free of Enzo, free of the world I was born into, it might be different. Then again, it's only when you want nothing at all that you can be truly free. I can't have that with her. I've already made choices I would never have made since I pulled her into my life, and even once I'm free of Enzo, I wouldn't be free of her.

And that's not what I want.

I want the freedom I was promised, and that's all that should concern me.

I clean up the house, put out the fire, go outside and lock the front door. Then I stalk over to another shed, a bigger one down the back of the yard. Inside there's a motorcycle. It's for emergency transport, the keys on a nail beside the door.

Soon I'm on the road, the icy wind cutting through me, cutting away the warmth of Astrid's touch, of her kiss, of her body. Cutting away all my vulnerabilities until I'm nothing but the weapon again. Cold. Emotionless. The way I was when I first approached her on the beach.

She doesn't have a phone since I threw it out the window, so I'll have to go to her house physically so she can talk to me about her father. It's not ideal, seeing her again, but once she's given me her information, I'll leave once and for all.

I don't have any other choice.

The street is quiet when I get there. Her Beetle is parked in the driveway, so she's arrived home safely. I don't allow myself to feel relief. Instead, I kick down the stand, wondering how she managed to deal with her enforcer friend, and whether I'll now have the entire club on my tail.

It won't matter. Soon there won't be any club at all.

The wind rustles through the trees that line the street, branches waving, as I get off the bike and climb quickly up the side of the house to get to her bedroom. I can't go through the front door if they're still talking.

There's no light on inside, and the window is shut, so she must still be downstairs. I open the window easily enough and climb inside. The room is empty, so I go quickly to the door and open it, moving silently down the hallway.

Voices drift up the stairwell. Astrid's sounding upset and the deeper tones of her father, urgent and insistent.

My gut clenches at Astrid's distress, but I force myself to stay still. I need to wait until she's done, since there's no point alerting the chief to my presence. Eventually he'll have to deal with Enzo, but not until my family makes themselves useful and gets rid of the MC first.

Then abruptly all hell breaks loose, and I hear the front door crash open.

I move down the stairs, but the hall is full of men wearing balaclavas, which means they're soldiers of one of the families and I can already guess which one. Since it's not us, it must be the Morettis, since they're the only ones who would even think to come to Astrid Starling's house.

I grab my Glock and take a few shots, but several of them are coming for me and I have to duck the bullets. By the time they're dead and I get down to the bottom of the stairs, it's empty but for the bodies. The front door is off its hinges, and of Astrid and the chief there's no sign.

Where's Astrid? Where the fuck is she?

The beast inside me is roaring, but I shove it in a box and nail it shut. Now is not the time for fury or panic. The Morettis must have taken Astrid to get the same information we want out of her, and if so, I need to get her back ASAP.

I stand in the hall and take a couple of breaths to make sure that fucking beast is trapped. Then when I'm cold and clear again, I crouch beside one of the bodies and rip away the balaclava. I don't recognise the face, but when I

lift his hand and see the tattoo on his wrist, the tattoo that all the Moretti hitmen get, my suspicion is confirmed.

Carlos must have got tired of Angelo's silence and sent his men after Astrid. And since the chief isn't anywhere around, they must have taken him, too.

I rise, getting out my phone to call Lazarus, but just as I do, I hear the roar of a Harley. Talk about fucking timing. Moving quickly, I step out the front door and watch as her friend, the Hound, pulls up outside the house.

I make no attempt to hide. My brain is making decisions, focused on one thing and one thing only. Finding Astrid. The Hound is muscle I might need, especially against the Morettis, and he'll want to find her as badly as I do. I can use that.

He pulls his Harley up, kicks down the stand and strides toward me, his face cold and hard. I aim my Glock. We don't have time for dick-measuring right now.

"You," he says stopping dead at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes, me," I say coldly. "They have Astrid and the chief."

He blinks and I'll give him this, his expression gets even harder, his stare even more focused as he says the only thing that matters. "Who has?"

"People who mean them harm. Did you see any vehicle pass you on the way here? Moving fast?"

His dark gaze flickers as he processes this, and I can see the questions he wants to demand answers for cross his face. But he knows what's at stake, and he only says, "Black van. It went past me at speed."

"You get a plate?"

The Hound continues to stare fixedly at me as he rattles it off, and if I was a lesser man, I might be intimidated by it. "You're not just a stalker are you, motherfucker?" he says.

But I'm not a lesser man and I've bested him a couple of times already, as I have many others of his type. "No," I say. "But let's not get into that

right now, shall we? I want what you want, which is Astrid safe and out of harm's way."

A muscle flicks in his jaw, but he only nods.

"I'm going to call some people," I say curtly. "They'll help with the plate."

I call Lazarus, keeping my Glock aimed at the Hound's head just in case he tries to do anything stupid.

"We have a problem," I say as he answers.

"What problem?"

"The Morettis have just taken the chief and Astrid."

"Fuck," Lazarus says succinctly. "I told you that you shouldn't have got rid of Angelo."

"Too late for that now." I keep my voice cold. "We need to find them and fast. If I give you a plate, can you run it? Find out who owns it? Maybe look for traffic cameras?"

"Yes. Kill has access. Give me a minute. I'll call you back."

The phone call disconnects, leaving me standing there with the Hound at gunpoint. He stares at me, his expression utterly impenetrable. "What do you want?" he asks into the silence. "What's Astrid to you?"

This could go badly if I was a man who let his feelings get the better of him, but I'm not that man and I have no feelings. Not anymore. "She's nothing to me," I say, giving her up and ignoring the bone-deep denial of the beast inside me. "But she has information I want."

"Is that why you took her?" he asks.

"Yes." I won't give him the truth. It's better he doesn't know that she's more than that to me. It's better if I don't acknowledge it, either.

"What information?"

"You think I'll tell you?"

He says nothing, just gives me an up-and-down look. "You don't need to tell me. You're after our business, aren't you?"

Of course he's worked it out. He knew immediately the kind of man I was in that parking lot. That's why he came for me, to protect her. My Tinkerbell might be naïve, but he isn't.

I say nothing, keeping my Glock aimed at his head, but he only smiles without amusement. "So, what did she tell you? I mean, you had her for a couple of hours so she must have told you something."

My arm stays still. The muzzle of my gun doesn't waver.

He keeps grinning. "Oh, so she told you nothing. You really thought she would?"

I'm getting tired of this conversation and it's very tempting to pull the trigger, put a bullet between his eyes the way I put one into his friend, Creep. But Astrid wouldn't like it, and that matters to me.

So, I continue to stay silent as he stands at the foot of the steps, his hands in his pockets and very casual, as if the Vaccaris most lethal enforcer doesn't have a fucking gun pointed at his head.

Then the phone in my hand buzzes. It's Lazarus again.

"Kill ran the plates," he says when I answer. "It's a van registered to one of the Moretti soldiers and we got lucky. There's a tracker on it. It's likely the Morettis use it to monitor their vehicles, but Kill managed to hack into it. They're heading toward an old factory on the outskirts of town. There's nothing else out there, so that's probably their goal."

I don't bother with thank-yous. I disconnect the call immediately. "They're headed south, to an old factory on the edge of town," I say to the Hound.

"Yeah," he says. "I know it. Used to be for fish processing until the fishing industry died."

"I wonder why," I say.

He smirks. "So, you gonna kill me or are you gonna let me save her?"

Slowly, I lift the muzzle of my Glock. "Go," I say. "I'll be right behind you."

He doesn't wait, which I give him credit for. He turns and makes straight for his Harley without another word, swinging a leg over it then gunning the engine.

I don't hesitate, either. I'm making for my own bike as he pulls away, the beast in me howling and scraping at the walls of the box I put it in. Wanting to get to her, wanting to protect her, make sure she's safe.

She will be, I'll make sure of it, and then I'll kill everyone involved in her abduction. And once she's been rescued, I'll kill that beast, too.

I'll put it out of its misery once and for all.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

ASTRID

When I come to, everything is still dark. My head hurts and my mouth is dry and gritty, like the bottom of a birdcage. I'm sitting upright in a chair, I think, but the reason everything is still dark is because there's a blindfold over my eyes. My wrists are tied, too, and when I try to move my legs, I can't. My ankles have been tied to the legs of the chair.

Fear swells like an icy tide inside me. What the hell happened? Dad was giving me a hug after he told me all that stuff about how the club has been blackmailing him, and then that he'd been collecting information on them and then...

I swallow as I remember. The men wearing balaclavas. Shots firing. Dad with a gun in his hand and then... Nothing.

My head throbs, which obviously means someone hit me hard enough to knock me out.

The tide of fear rises higher. Who took me? Are they related to Lucien? Does he work for them? What do they want? And, oh my God, Dad. What happened to Dad?

The tide threatens to swamp me, and I have to take a couple of breaths to let it out, because panicking now would not be a great idea. I need to

think, I need to get a grip.

Suddenly, someone pulls my blindfold off and dim light replaces darkness. I gasp, squinting as my vision returns.

I was right, I'm sitting in a metal chair and I'm tied to it, my wrists to the arms, my ankles to the legs. I'm in some big wide industrial space, with huge, dirty, cracked windows high up on the walls. I can't see much since my glasses are gone and it's dark, and the only light is above me, but bits and pieces of steel and wood, and mechanical detritus are scattered over the dirty concrete floor. The place stinks of old fish and dampness, and it's cold.

But then I see who's facing me, tied to another chair. Dad. He's not blindfolded, and his expression is like stone. Though when I meet his gaze, he gives me a small, encouraging smile.

A momentary relief floods through me. Thank God, Dad is here and he's alive, though my relief quickly vanishes when I see the man standing next to his chair, a gun in his hand. In fact, there are a number of men standing around, all wearing balaclavas, and all armed.

"Well, chief?" the man pointing the gun at Dad's head says. "Now's your chance. Or else your pretty daughter will have one finger less."

I realise some other guy is standing by my chair and he roughly grabs one of my fingers in an unbreakable grip. In his other hand, he has a knife.

Cold realisation pours through me, and I can't control my shiver. They have Dad and they have me, and if they're threatening my father, then I can guess what they want. The same thing Lucien wanted. And they're going to do to me what Lucien threatened to do to me, aren't they?

"... someone else will take my place, and they won't care about you, Astrid. They will hurt you to get to your father, believe me."

Lucien's voice and what he told me back in the cabin drifts through my head. So, it seems he was right, someone else has taken his place. Or perhaps I've been naïve all this time in believing he'd never hurt me. Perhaps he's part of this.

“It’s okay,” Dad says, looking straight at me and ignoring the man questioning him. “It’s okay, Addie. I won’t let them hurt you.”

The man beside his chair laughs. “And how are you going to do that, chief? You’re a little tied up now.”

Several of the others laugh weakly at the stupid joke, and I look from face to face, trying to see if any of them have blue eyes. Is Lucien here? Is he one of them? Fuck, I need my glasses to be sure, but I really hope he isn’t.

I want to ask the man straight out if Lucien Frost is part of this, but I don’t want to betray either myself or him, so instead, I look back at Dad. “I know, Dad,” I say in a thin voice. “I’m okay.”

“Come on, chief.” The man beside Dad gives him a cuff over the back of his head with the butt of his gun. “Answer the question or my buddy here will start cutting.”

I flinch at the blow myself, protective anger rising inside me, thick and hot, and drowning my fear. “Leave him alone,” I say sharply, which is pretty pointless considering it’s clear they’re *not* going to leave him alone.

“There’s no need to involve her.” Dad sounds unutterably weary. “The MC pays me to look the other way. That’s it. That’s all. She’s not part of it.”

“They pay you? That’s it?”

Dad shrugs. “It’s good money.”

He’s lying of course and he’s lying to protect me.

“There are other interests who have their eyes on the MC’s operation,” the man growls. “What do you know about the Frosts?”

The name sends a hard, electric jolt through me. The Frosts. It’s plural, implying that Lucien is not the only Frost, also, if these people are asking about him, then he’s not part of this little situation.

Weirdly, despite the situation, I’m relieved. I always knew he wouldn’t hurt me, but it’s nice to know that my trust wasn’t misplaced.

Dad frowns, genuinely puzzled. "Who? The Frosts? No. I have no idea who they are."

The man flicks his gaze to me and his mouth curves in a mirthless smile. "You want to tell him, or shall I?"

My whole body goes tight. "W-What?" My stutter is real as is the fear that suddenly comes roaring back. Does he mean tell Dad about Lucien and I? If so, how does he know? The only time we've been together in public was in Love Bite that one night. He can't know. He can't.

"Oh, I think you know what I'm talking about, sweetheart," he says, correctly reading the shock on my face. "You and Lucien getting cosy together."

Shock and fear wash through me, then they're gone, drowned by the heat of my blazing temper. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about," I say flatly.

He shrugs. "Your funeral. Maybe quite literally." He throws a glance at the man standing next to my chair and nods. The man grips my index finger tightly and the knife blade presses against my skin, sinking in. Pain is a burst of light streaking through me.

"No!" Dad shouts. "Stop!"

But he doesn't know that pain is an old friend of mine. Pain clears my head, pain helps me think. I'm used to it. And while this is a lot more pain than I ever give myself, the sharp, clean of the agony cuts away my fear.

I grit my teeth, determined not to make a sound as the knife slices through my skin and blood pours down my finger, dripping onto the floor. He hasn't cut my finger off, but it's a deep cut all the same.

"I told you what you wanted to know," Dad says furiously. He doesn't look tired now, he looks enraged. "Leave her the fuck alone!"

But the man shakes his head. "I don't think you did tell me, chief. I think you're lying." He flicks a glance at me. "Your daughter knows a thing or two, too, don't you?"

I breathe deep and slow, letting the pain course through me, sharpening everything, making everything clear. I don't want to tell him about Lucien. I don't want to put him in danger, because considering these guys are all armed to the teeth, I might.

"What's he talking about, Astrid?" Dad asks, tension in his voice.

My brain moves faster, processing several things at once. Lucien told me he'd be coming to get that information from me tonight, but he'll arrive to see the front door kicked in and Dad and I gone. Wolf said he'd send someone to watch over the house, too, so whoever comes will discover the same thing.

They'll know Dad and me have been taken, and they won't like that one bit. They'll try to find us, come for us. I don't know how exactly they'll find us, but they'll definitely come.

"Oh," I say, forcing the words through the pain. "Are you talking about the guy whose been stalking me?"

"Stalking you?" Dad echoes.

"That's not what I heard," the man says over the top of him. "Tell me what you know about him."

"Nothing," I say, which is true. "I haven't talked to him."

"Yeah, that's bullshit." The man wanders over from Dad's chair to mine and stands in front of me. "You were seen in the bar talking to a guy with tattoos. Ring a bell?"

Right. So someone *did* see us in Love Bite.

"Him?" I say, breathing fast, trying to get my thoughts in order. "That was someone who asked me out on a date. Just a student from—"

The man nods and the knife sinks deeper scraping on bone, and a low moan escapes me. The pain is intense, so much sharper than anything I've ever experienced, but strangely, I feel like I can handle it. It's kind of ... exhilarating.

“Addie!” Dad shouts, struggling now against the plastic ties keeping him in the chair. “Let her go. I’ll give you anything you want.”

“Brave little thing, aren’t you?” the man in front of me says. He sounds older, though I can’t really tell if he is. He’s got that balaclava on and my vision is too weak to let me see his eyes. “But he’s not a student, sweetheart, and you know it. Some of my men disappeared here a few days ago, and I’m pretty sure Lucien Frost was involved. He’s quite ... well known, shall we say, to our family.”

Frantically I try to process what he’s just said. Some of his men disappeared. Was one of them the guy who attacked me? The guy who wanted me to take him to Dad? The one whom Lucien killed? How does he know this? And who the hell is his family?”

“If you know who he is already, why do you need me to tell you?” I say, my voice thin and thready.

“Was he using you?” the man demands. “Who is he working for? Is it his family?”

Blood drips steadily down my finger and onto the floor. I don’t look at it, but the pain is making me lightheaded and a little sick. I embrace it, though, using it to ground me. “I don’t know who he’s working for,” I say. “He didn’t tell me.”

“Oh, I think he did,” the man murmurs. “In fact, given what I know about Lucien Frost, I’m surprised you’re still whole and alive.” He takes a step forward then crouches down in front of me. “He left you alive for a reason, didn’t he?”

“He can’t kill me and neither can you,” I force out. “And you can’t kill the chief, either. You need us both if you want to take over the MC’s operation.”

“Addie,” Dad says urgently. “Don’t say anything more.”

“I mean, we could,” the man says mildly. “The chief is eminently replaceable and if he is, then so are you.”

“But then you’ll have to cut a deal with the new chief who won’t be as amenable as Dad is.”

“True,” the man says. “I do so hate complications. Then again, that doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun with you both first, hmm?”

Then a few things happen at once.

He nods to the man with the knife who takes the tip of my finger off with a sharp, clean cut, and as the pain roars through me, deafening me, the man in front of me turns suddenly, barking orders to his men. They’re all turning, too, lifting their weapons. One pulls the trigger, but the back of his head abruptly explodes in a shower of blood and tissue, and he falls to the ground.

Dad is shouting at me, his face white, but I can’t hear anything.

All of my attention is focused on the man dressed in black, emerging from the shadows. He’s got a gun in his hand, and he shoots one man then another, his aim perfect, they all go down like targets at a shooting range.

A few people are following him. A tall, slender woman with black hair, whose aim is almost as good as his, and another man who looks like Wolf.

I can’t really tell, though. There’s only the man in black, his face expressionless as he takes out the enemy, his electric-blue eyes cold.

The man who cut my finger off goes down without a sound, then the one who was asking me questions comes to stand beside my chair and I feel him press the muzzle of his gun against my head.

“Take another step and she dies,” he says. “Enzo will—”

But he doesn’t finish his sentence because Lucien pulls the trigger without a single hesitation and both the man and his gun fall to the ground.

Lucien says nothing as he strides to the chair I’ve been tied to, reaching to grab his knife from his boot and using it to cut through the plastic ties holding me in place. I’m dizzy and sick, the pain getting more and more acute, but relief is coursing through me.

He’s here. He came for me. I knew he would.

“Luc,” I force out. “They asked me about you, but I didn’t tell them. I didn’t say a word.”

“Hush,” he says, cutting the last tie free. Then he bends and scoops me up in his arms, which is just as well since I wouldn’t have been able to walk anyway.

I look up at his beautiful face as he cradles me against his hard, warm chest, and forget about the pain as I inhale his scent, smoke and dark forests and spice. His body heat takes the chill from me, and all I want to do is close my eyes and sleep.

Dimly I hear voices. Dad’s and Wolf’s and a few others, but I don’t take any notice of them.

The only thing that matters is that Lucien’s here and he has me.

I’m safe.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

LUCIEN

I stride past Thea, Lazarus, the Hellhound and various members of his club as they start going over the bodies we've left behind. The Hound has released the chief and now both of them are calling after me, following me, but I don't stop.

Astrid is curled against my chest, shivering, the blood from the finger she lost the tip of staining my hoodie and her own blue dress. She's warm, alive, and I smell the metallic tang of her blood and acrid taint of her fear. And beneath that, lavender, and her own sweet scent.

A feeling winds through me, and I don't know if it's relief, but if I think about it too hard, it might take my knees out from under me, so I don't think about it. I need to get her somewhere safe, where her finger can be treated and she has something for the pain. Not a hospital. There'll be too many questions at a hospital, and we can't afford any more attention.

I carry Astrid outside to the gravel area in front of the old factory and over to Lazarus's car, since I came here by bike, and she can't hold onto me, not in this condition.

"Luc," Thea says from behind me, her voice sharp. "What are you doing?"

“She needs treatment.” I open the passenger door and carefully put Astrid in the seat. “I’m taking her to the house. There’s a full first-aid kit there, yes?”

“You can’t take her to the house.” Thea is frowning at me. “There’s a factory full of dead Morettis, a lot of fucking Hellhounds, and the Blackwater Chief of Police, and you’re worried about the girl?”

I ignore her, pulling open the driver’s side door and getting in.

“Luc,” she says flatly. “We don’t have time for this. Also, you know no one goes to the house except us.”

“I don’t care,” I say then shut the door in her face.

I pull out onto the road, leaving Thea cursing in my wake. I should stay, help them clean up the mess, and I definitely shouldn’t take Astrid back to the house, but she’s hurt, and while I know she’s not their priority, she’s mine.

She’s mine.

Fuck.

You were supposed to leave her, never see her again, not rescue her and take her home with you.

I know, I shouldn’t have. Just as I shouldn’t have killed everyone in that factory. If I’d been thinking straight, I’d have left at least one of the Morettis alive for interrogation, let the chief call an ambulance for his daughter, then stayed with my family to confront the Hellhounds.

But I wasn’t thinking straight.

The Hound and I arrived, and while Lazarus told me to wait for him, I didn’t, and neither did the Hound. We went in and took a look at the scene, discovering Astrid and the chief tied to chairs while a bunch of Morettis stood around watching them being interrogated.

Normally, I would have had a plan. I’d have assessed the scene, figured out an approach before going in guns blazing.

But I saw Astrid tied to her chair, the light above her making her seem so pale and fragile, like a mirage, and I saw the prick with the knife use it on her, cutting the top off one of her delicate fingers. And something exploded in my head, the beast shredding the box and roaring its fury at anyone who dared to hurt her. Anyone who dared touch to her.

I was moving before I could think, mowing them down like wheat as I made for her, going into Terminator mode to take down the people who tortured her, who let her blood drip onto the floor like it meant nothing.

She saw me coming, her eyes pinned to mine, and I could see her relief and her joy. No one looks like that at me when I come for them with a gun in my hand. No one is ever ... joyful.

She was, though, melting against me as I untied her and carried away from the people who hurt her.

I wasn't thinking then, and I'm not thinking now. All I know is that I have to get home to where there's a full first-aid kit, and as quickly as I can.

She'll be in pain, and while she likes pain, she won't like this type.

I glance over to where she's curled in the passenger seat, leaning against the window, her eyes closed, her bleeding hand held protectively against her chest. She looks so small, so vulnerable, and my chest gets tighter and tighter.

This was my mistake. If I hadn't killed Angelo Moretti, then perhaps Carlos wouldn't have seen fit to bring some of his crew to Blackwater, and they wouldn't have taken Astrid. Then again, perhaps they would have anyway, considering what Moretti was doing just before I interrupted him.

Something heavy sits inside me, a weight pressing against all my vital organs. She could have died. I could have lost her.

Did you ever really have her, though?

For the space of a couple of hours, I did. In the cabin, she went to sleep in my arms, and I imagined for just a moment what it would be like to have someone who was mine. What it would be like to have *her*.

But I can only imagine it, because I'm not truly free and she's not truly mine, and I need to remember that. I need to remind myself what happens to people who get dragged into my world, because I've seen it before.

They get hurt. They die.

She's in your world already.

"Is Dad okay?" Astrid asks, her voice thick.

"Yes. We got him out."

"Good." She's silent a moment, then goes on. "He was being blackmailed. That's how the club gets away with the weapons thing at the port. Dad agreed not to interfere when the club president offered to pay for Mom's cancer treatment. But then after she died, they needed something else to hold over his head, and that something is me."

A hot, raw sensation grips me. This is the information I've been hunting for, and I didn't even have to ask her. I didn't even have to threaten her. She's just ... giving it to me like a gift.

My jaw gets tight and I grip the steering wheel, my knuckles white. "That's why you were taken," I say. "They wanted that information."

"Yes," she says softly. "And they wanted to know about you."

I grit my teeth. Fucking Moretti. It was Justin, Carlos's oldest son who was directing Astrid's torture, and I wasn't going to start getting into a conversation with him about what Enzo did or didn't want. I shot him before he had a chance to say anything more, and that was likely a mistake.

But he had a gun to her head, and I couldn't let that stand.

Still, if it's Enzo's hand directing the Morettis, then maybe this is him getting impatient and wanting to move things along. Which makes me wonder if he's doubting me and my ability.

He shouldn't. He knows how badly I want to be released from my oaths, I'm not going to do anything that jeopardises that.

"But you didn't tell them," I say.

"No." She sighs. "I knew you'd come, though, so I tried to stall them."

I glance at her again, that hot, raw thing pulsing through me once more. She knew I'd come. Why? Why was she so certain after we said goodbye?

"You knew I'd come for the information you promised me," I say, wanting to clarify.

"Well, that, and..." Her eyelashes flutter and lift, and she looks at me, her gaze darkness itself. "You came for me, too."

I want to tell her she's wrong, that this means nothing. That I'm concerned for her only so far, but it's a lie I can't bring myself to say. So, all I say is, "Your Hound came for you, too."

She blinks. "Wolf? He was there?"

"He arrived at your house after you were taken," I say. "I'm assuming to see if you were okay. He managed to get the plate of the van you were in and there was a GPS tracker on it. We followed that to the factory."

She nods, her eyes fluttering closed again. "They're using me, Luc," she whispers. "My life is being held over Dad's head."

My body is tight, every single muscle demanding action. I want to get my gun and kill. Kill everyone who thought they could use her life as a bargaining chip. But that life is what keeps that operation running without police interference. Her fucking life. And that life will continue to be held over the chief's head, because that's what Lazarus wants. It's what Enzo wants, too.

The price of that operation continuing for the foreseeable future is her.

I shouldn't care. It shouldn't bother me. Yet pressure is building inside me, a pressure that I can't seem to push away or get rid of. Her life matters to me for some reason, and the fact that it will be continually under threat is unacceptable.

"Where is Dad, anyway?" she asks, her voice slurring a little.

I step on the gas, going faster. I need to get her home. "Your Hellhound friend cut him loose. Don't speak, Tinkerbelle. I'm getting you somewhere where I can treat that wound of yours and get you some pain relief."

“Mmm,” she mutters. “That would be good.”

I shut my mouth and keep driving, while she slumps against the passenger window. She doesn't speak again until I'm driving through the gates and pulling up outside the house.

She stirs and looks out the windows, frowning slightly. “Where are we?”

“Somewhere safe,” I say.

I get out, grab her out of the car, too, then carry her inside, heading for the main bathroom where the first-aid kit is. It's not a basic kit. It's got everything you might need to treat all kinds of injuries – needles, thread, hard painkillers, bandages, scalpels. The works.

She snuggles against my chest as I carry her down the main hallway like a small cat curling up in a basket. She believes she's safe, but safe is the last thing she is, and never has been.

Renewed fury burns inside me, but I shove it aside. There's no time for inconvenient emotions, no matter how unexpectedly strong they are.

The bathroom is big and tiled in black marble. There's a huge black marble vanity that I sit her on top of before grabbing the kit from the cupboard. Inside there's a syringe full of anaesthetic that I'll use as a nerve blocker. I've used it before, on myself and on others, and I have enough medical knowledge to do basic, battleground first aid.

I take out the syringe and take her injured hand gently in mine. “This is a nerve blocker,” I say. “It'll help with the pain. I need to clean the wound and sew it up.”

She blinks at me, her face dead white. She's going into shock, which means I need to deal with this and fast, then get her warm. “Okay,” she whispers.

Without a word, I inject the anaesthetic and she shivers but makes no sound. Once I've administered it, I wait for it to take effect, searching for

something to say that will comfort and maybe distract her. It's difficult since giving comfort is not something I'm used to.

"I know you like pain," I say at last. "But this is ridiculous."

Her expression eases, her mouth curving in the faintest smile, and that hot, raw, painful emotion spreads through me like wildfire. "So, let me guess. You're a doctor as well as being good with a gun?"

"No, but I have some basic knowledge. I've sewn up people before, including myself."

"No hospital, then?"

"No," I say. "Too many questions and too many eyes."

She nods and then lets out a sigh of relief, all the tension leaving her body. "Oh my God, that's much better."

I take this as confirmation the nerve blocker has worked, so then I go about the business of treating her finger. I irrigate the wound then grab some thread and a needle. There's a small flap of skin just above her first knuckle, so I use that to seal the wound and sew it shut.

As I hold her hand in mine, she leans against my shoulder, her breath warm and soft against my ear. My chest aches at the way she's melted into me, the way she let me care for her without question, as if I'm someone familiar and trusted, and not someone who just killed a whole factory full of people.

"You're good at that," she observes sleepily, watching me stitch her wound.

"I've had practice."

"You said you've sewn yourself up. Why? What happened?"

"Nothing major." I keep my reply casual. "A couple of bullets that went astray."

"Is that where your scars came from?"

I have to work to keep my hand steady as I stitch her, to not let that question jolt me from the inside out. No one asks me about those scars. No

one has ever been interested enough, not that I'd tell them in any case.

Those scars are the price of Enzo's justice, and I don't discuss that with anyone.

"Yes," I lie, since that's the easiest answer.

"No, they're not," she says, her voice still sleepy. "If they were, you'd have had to sew your own back up and you can't, silly."

Silly. She calls me silly. She must really be in shock.

"You're right," I say carefully. "I didn't sew those ones up."

"So, where did they come from, then?" She shifts so her chin is on my shoulder, and I can feel her gaze on me. "Or are you not going to answer again?"

I focus on the thread I'm pulling tight, being careful with her soft skin. "They're just scars, Tinkerbell."

"Scars covered in ink." She shifts so her cheek is resting against my shoulder instead of her chin. "What's with all the tattoos?"

I'm looking down at what I'm doing, stitching neatly and precisely, and I don't want to answer her questions. There are too many old graves in my past that I don't want her digging up. Then again, I can answer this one. She might like the answer after all. "A reminder that pain can be beautiful," I say, making another small stitch. "That it can be art."

She sighs. "You're crazy. I love it."

I glance at her, the soft curve of her cheek, her pale lashes framing the grey of her eyes. They're crystalline almost and soft as rain clouds. She smiles. "They're beautiful," she says. "And so are you." The look she's giving me is like summer rain, too. Soft, gentle, cool on my skin. She's the beautiful one, not me.

I've never wanted gentleness or care, and have never felt the lack, either. But right now, I'm wondering what it would be like to be cared about and cared for by her.

She wanted to give her life for her friend. What if she felt that strongly for me? I have imagined so many things with her, and I can't keep doing it. The only thing worse than hope is knowing that there is no hope at all.

So, I turn away, direct my attention to finishing what I'm doing. "There's nothing beautiful about me, Tinkerbelle. I'm a killer, remember?"

"A killer with very neat stitches," she says, not picking up on what she's doing to me or how she's making me feel. "I'm starting to get cold, though."

"I know," I say. "Just let me finish this and I'll find you something warm."

A couple of minutes later, her finger is done, and I take her back into the living area, settle her on the couch with a blanket, a glass of water and some strong painkillers. She takes them without a word, swallowing them down with the water.

I watch her, my brain returning to its usual examination of my own failings, at how I took her out of that factory, ignoring everyone and everything in favour of getting her somewhere safe and tending to her wounds. At how I keep trying to lie to myself that I'm just protecting my target, my source. That it's not about how she's more to me than that.

And she can't be.

I already made that decision back at the cabin, earlier in the evening. That I would get what I needed from her and then get her out of my life. But I've done the opposite. I rescued her and far from getting her out my life, I've taken her back here, to my family's property, which no one is supposed to know about.

She looks up at me from where she's sitting on the couch, and a part of me notes that she has some colour in her face and is pleased. "I took care of you, now you're taking care of me," she says. "So, thank you. Though I have to say, losing a finger beats a split eyebrow."

She's settling in as if she lives here already and that's impossible. Keeping her here is impossible.

"Astrid," I say. "I'm sorry, but you can't stay here. The people I work for—"

"Oh, you mean the Frosts?" she interrupts. "The guy holding Dad and I hostage asked if we knew anything about them. I assume he meant you." She frowns. "He said Frosts, plural, which seems to imply there's more of you." Abruptly, she blinks and looks around, as if she's only just registered that she's somewhere new. "Hey, is this your house? Do you live here?"

I ignore her questions. "The people I work for want that weapons operation, which means if they take it from the MC, your life will still be on the line."

She stares at me for a long second and clearly reality must be crashing in on her, because she abruptly looks down at her injured hand, one finger covered in the bandage I put on it. "Yes," she says softly. "I know."

The beast inside me howls at this, at its own lack of agency and choices. At the fact that it can't save her, and neither can I.

Enzo wants this operation, it's a lynchpin in his worldwide network, and he will do anything to get it. And if anyone gets in his way, he will kill them. He's Tribunal, and what he says goes.

As if on cue, the burner in my leather jacket vibrates, the burner that only has Enzo's number on it, and ice gathers inside me. For the first time I don't want to answer it, I want to ignore it completely, but I can't. And it's not coincidence he's calling now, immediately after I rescued Astrid.

He *was* behind the Morettis taking her, wasn't he?

I'm so tense it feels as if moving could shatter me, but I reach into my pocket all the same and take out my phone, hitting the answer button.

"Lucien," Enzo purrs, the sound of Italy accenting my name. "Apologies for the interference, but you were taking too long. Carlos offered a solution."

“I would have had the information tonight.” I can’t keep the heat of my fury from my voice. “There was no need for it.”

“Oh, don’t be angry with me, *mio figlio*,” he says indulgently, far too pleased with himself for comfort. “You still have one final role to play.”

On the couch, Astrid looks up at me, concern in her eyes, so I turn away, moving out of the living area and into the hallway. I don’t want her to hear this conversation, whatever it’s going to be about.

“What do you want?” I ask coldly.

“You know what I want. Your family on a platter. And you should be thanking me for the distraction I provided. Now they’re all dealing with the mess at the factory, and here you are, at home.” He pauses. “With her.”

There’s no escape as my blood becomes ice, freezing everything inside me.

How does he know I left the factory with Astrid? I didn’t leave anyone alive long enough to see the aftermath, let alone me walking back to the car with her and taking her back here. But clearly, he does know, which means someone told him. Either that, or he witnessed it himself.

Fuck. Is he here? In Blackwater? Now?

And if he knows you took her away, then he must know how you feel about her.

I bite down hard on the growl that gathers in my throat and all the questions I want to ask. “She’s an asset,” I say, struggling to keep any sign of emotion from my voice, still less surprise that he knows what happened at the factory. “That’s all.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. By all accounts you went in there, guns blazing, and carried her out like Sleeping Beauty. You didn’t even stop to chat with your family.” He laughs. “I never knew you were such a romantic.”

Someone told him. Someone who was there tonight and alive enough to see me take her away. Shit.

Fury tries to melt the ice inside me, but even my anger is no match for the cold. The cold that should have been there all this time yet somehow started to melt because one little college student with a fruit knife cut herself and sassed me and I liked it. And I have no one but myself to blame for that.

Denying it will only make things worse, especially when I've already betrayed myself, so I say nothing. There's nothing to say.

"Here's what's going to happen," Enzo says, the playful note in his voice vanishing. "You're going to open the gates to the house right now, so my men can get in."

What? He wants to take control now? Here?

"I thought you wanted to wait until they'd gotten rid of the MC?" I ask, unable to keep the surprise from my voice.

"I did. Then I changed my mind. They've got a nice little set-up in Blackwater and have already done the legwork for me, so there's really no need to wait any longer."

I turn and lean against the wall, trying to find the hard, cold core of me.

The moment of truth is here. Once I've let Enzo's men in, that's my part in this particular drama played out. My brothers and sister will die in a hail of gunfire. Or maybe Enzo's men will lie in wait and then kill them silently, slitting their throats before they're even aware. Then again, Lazarus would never go down without a fight. And Thea? The little girl who used to be my shadow? And Killian, the little monster who never did what he was told?

The memories are long gone. Too many years have passed, and I have too many scars to feel anything for them. They're nothing to me now. Especially when what I was promised at the very start of this mission is within my grasp.

My freedom. At last, at last, at fucking last.

"Yes, boss," I say, steady as a rock.

“Excellent,” he replies. “You’re a good soldier, Lucien. One of the best.”

“Thank you, boss.”

“You’re like a son to me, I hope you know that.”

That’s what he calls me. *Mio figlio*. My son. It’s never bothered me before, but there’s something in his voice now, something that sounds like a warning.

I stare blankly at the wall opposite as the slow, icy fingers of doubt creep through me. I’m like a son to him, that’s what he said, and the sons of bosses stay in the family. Sons can never leave.

Those fingers wrap themselves slowly around my heart and squeeze. He told me he would release me after this was done, that I would be free. He promised me that.

“I do,” I say. “And you’ve been like a father to me. But once this is done, you’ll let me go, yes? That’s what you promised.”

There’s a small cold silence.

“Of course,” Enzo says. “You’ll get your reward, don’t you worry.”

My reward. That’s not the same as “freedom”. And the tone of his voice, too ready, too smooth.

The fingers squeeze tighter, but I already know it’s not going to happen.

Enzo won’t let me go. He’ll never let me go.

I’ll remain his forever.

Chapter Thirty-Five

ASTRID

I settle back in the couch, nursing my hand. The pain has dulled to a low throb now that the painkillers have kicked in, and I'm much warmer after Luc gave me a blanket. I'm also feeling strangely light, as if I could float away at any second, which is definitely the painkillers, but I'm not arguing. It's better than suffering the agony of having the tip of your finger cut off.

Now my shock has dissipated, and the pain isn't so acute, I'm finally able to process what happened, and where I am now. When Luc helped me from the car, I got a vague impression of a big house, very architectural in style, with lots of glass and stone, and surrounded by dark forest. Inside, it was all white walls and wooden floors, and then that bathroom where he stitched me up, black marble, stainless steel and more glass.

Expensive, my pain-hazed brain thought, and certainly nothing in this room proves otherwise. There's the leather, sectional sofa I'm nestled in, the large wooden coffee table in front of me, and rows of bookshelves against the white walls. A huge TV graces the only empty wall, with a high-end sound system on a console table beneath it. There's also one of those fancy fireplaces that sit in the middle of the room with a flue that goes straight up and through the roof.

I'm surprised, I can't lie. Luc must have money stashed away somewhere. Or maybe it's his family's, since there's more than one Frost.

Were they there at the factory? There was that woman I didn't recognise and then some other people's voices, but I can't really remember anyone else.

The painkillers are really doing their job, because I should be more than a little afraid, especially after all that's happened, but I'm not. In fact, it feels as if I've been gently wrapped in cotton wool and placed on a high shelf out of harm's way. It's a nice feeling. Weeping on Dad's chest then being hit over the head, then being tortured really takes it out of a girl.

I have no idea what's going to happen now, though. Luc's deep, dark voice drifts in from the hallway, and the sound would have lulled me if not for the harsh edge in it. I don't know who he's talking to, but the moment he pulled his phone out, his expression changed. He stopped being Luc and became the hard, cold, merciless killer.

It should worry me, but I've given up on worry. It's as if the pain from my finger washed everything else out of me, including the balloon in my chest, and now there's nothing there. Nothing but the memory of Luc carrying me out of the warehouse and bundling me into the car, taking me away from everything.

I didn't protest. Once I knew Dad was okay, all I wanted was to go with him.

Then him in the bathroom, reversing the roles we played in the cabin, with me being the injured one. He was so careful as he tended to my finger, so gentle, too; and the quiet competence with which he stitched me up...

I felt safe as he did it. So safe. His big muscular body was right there, like a wall, providing me with protection and support, and all I wanted to do was to stay there.

I close my eyes, remembering, warmth suffusing me, and I know it's not the painkillers this time. It's him. It's finally realising what matters, and it's

him.

It's stupid and it's fucked up, because I barely know anything about him apart from him being involved in the crime world somehow and completely comfortable with killing people. He's also so far from any man I'd ever thought I'd want – the opposite, even – yet he's touched a part of my soul, the dark part. The hot, angry part, the part that likes pain and is tired of being everyone's good, quiet girl. His jagged edges match mine, and I don't want to let him go. I can't.

Perhaps that's why I feel so peaceful. I'm surrendering to that warmth inside me, that powerful, deep hot thing that winds through me. That blazed into being the moment he stepped from the shadows in the factory, and I knew he was here for me. I can't fight it. I can't pretend I don't feel it. All I can do is embrace it, even though I have no idea how it's going to impact the rest of my life.

I hear footsteps, so I open my eyes and turn to the doorway, expecting to see Luc coming back. But the doorway is empty, and all I can hear is the sound of his fading footsteps.

The warmth inside me begins to dissipate. Where's he going? What happened with that phone call? Do I sit here and wait for him to come back, or do I go and find him?

I don't want to wait, so I get up from the couch and follow the sound of his footsteps, going down another hallway, then some stairs to another level of the house. At the far end of one hall, I see him open a door then step through, so I go after him.

He's left the door open when I get there and inside is a small room dominated by a huge desk, with walls of TV monitors, banks of controls and a few keyboards. The monitors display views of the surrounds, fences and gates and other small buildings, which are obviously part of the property.

It's a control room, controlling a shit-ton of security, which I suppose if you live in the world Lucien lives in, you'd need.

He's leaning over the desk, pushing some buttons and on one of the monitors, I see the front gates guarding the driveway open.

"Are we going somewhere?" I ask, leaning against the doorframe.

He must have heard me coming, because he doesn't startle. Instead, he straightens, staring at the screens. He doesn't look at me once. His tall figure is very still and he's radiating tension, and something is very wrong.

My heart clenches tight. I open my mouth to ask him what happened with the phone call, but before I can speak, he says, "The Hound. I need his cell number. Give it to me." He reaches into his pocket and gets out his phone, but not the one he was using before.

"Luc," I say quietly. "What's—"

"The number." His voice is an icy blade, cutting through mine like a knife through flesh.

My heart clenches tighter. Yes, something is *definitely* wrong. The chill coming from him is glacier-cold and it almost freezes the breath in my lungs. Still, I manage to rattle off Wolf's number for him, then ask, "Are you okay?"

He says nothing, not even looking at me as he enters the number into his phone before lifting it to his ear. "She's here," he says curtly, and I realise with a jolt that he's talking to Wolf about me. "I've treated her hand and she's safe. But you need to come and get her. *Now.*" He disconnects the call immediately.

Foreboding grips me, the happy warmth of the painkillers fading. "Luc," I say, moving into the room. "What's happening?"

He finally turns. His face is completely unreadable. He looks like an angel carved from marble, achingly beautiful but so cold, so hard. There's no fire in his eyes, no heat at all, only dead ashes.

The foreboding squeezes my heart, squeezes my throat, turns my blood to ice. “Luc,” I say hoarsely, taking a step toward him, reaching out as if I can bridge the gap I sense widening between us.

He doesn’t move. He only glances down at my extended hand as if he doesn’t know what it is or what I’m doing with it, then looks at me with those cold, dead eyes. “The Hound is coming for you,” he says, his voice a sheet of ice. “You have to go with him.”

I blink, a hundred questions spinning in my head that I know I’m not going to get answers to, not when he’s like this. I try a smile. “Oh? Are you guys friends now or something?”

He doesn’t smile back. It’s as if he’s forgotten how. “He’ll protect you.”

I swallow. “Protect me? What?”

“You can’t stay here, Astrid,” Lucien says coldly. “People are coming and you shouldn’t be here when they do.”

I’m chilled now, colder than I was when he brought me here, that terrible sense of foreboding getting stronger and stronger. “What about you?” I force out. “Where will you go?”

“Nowhere,” he says, the words harder than steel. “That wasn’t a request.”

He’s like stone now, towering over me, that awful blank nothingness in his eyes, and all I can think of to say is, “No. I want to stay with you.”

“No.” There’s no give in the word, it’s as stony and flat and empty as he is. “You have to leave.”

But I can’t. I don’t want to leave him, not when something horrible has happened and he won’t tell me what it is. So, I take another step toward him, standing in front of the door, blocking his exit. “What was that phone call about?” I ask. “Luc, please tell me what happened.”

“That’s none of your concern.” His tone cuts through me like that knife cut straight through my finger. “All you need to know is that you’re going with the Hound, and he will protect you.”

I barely take it in. All I can see is that something has hurt him, something has doused that fire in his eyes, taken something from him, and I'm desperate to know what. "Who do I need protecting from?" I ask. "Is someone—"

He moves before I can finish, closing the gap between us, his fingers wrapping around my upper arms like iron shackles. His face is still unreadable, but I can feel the fury in his hands, can sense it in his big, taut, muscular body. And deep in his eyes, in amongst all those ashes, I see a blue spark flicker. "You *have* to leave," he says, low and ferocious. "And if you don't go, I'll carry you out there myself."

But worry for him is strangling me. "Why?" I demand. "Why can't you tell me what's wrong? You look as if everyone you've ever loved has just died."

A muscle ticks in his hard jaw, his fingers pressing against my skin. It's as if he has himself on a leash and the collar is getting tighter and tighter as he strains against it. All I want to do is undo that collar, set him free. Isn't that what he wanted? That's what he told me in the cabin, that he wanted to be free.

I surge forward, going up on my toes, kissing his hard mouth, and for a second he doesn't move, his lips warm beneath mine. "I think I'm falling for you, Luc," I whisper, the words spilling helplessly out of me. "I think I'm falling in love with you."

I shouldn't have said it, I realise that straight away. I didn't know what I expected would happen, perhaps him saying it back or even just kissing me. Pulling me into his arms, the fire back in his eyes. Giving me his hunger, his demand, and the special pain that's his and his alone.

But he doesn't do any of that.

Instead, he pulls me roughly from him and before I can say a word, he picks me up, tosses me over his shoulder, and strides from the room.

I'm too shocked to say anything at first, but then I'm aware of his hard shoulder beneath me, his arm wound around my thighs, holding me tight, and for a second a wild thrill goes through me. Then reality asserts itself.

But he's not taking me to his bed. He's doing what he told me he'd do if I didn't obey him. He's carrying me away, striding through the front doors and out into the night. And he doesn't stop. He stalks up the driveway, still carrying me over his shoulder, and it doesn't matter how I struggle or kick, or how I rain my fists on his strong back, he keeps going.

He doesn't reply, either, as I shout at him to put me down, that I want to talk to him, that I want to know what's going on. He doesn't reply. He's as silent and inexorable as a stone golem.

Eventually we get to the front gates, and I'm exhausted from fighting and yelling, and my finger is starting to throb again. There's no one on the dark road so he keeps hold of me, standing there inviolate as I thrash about like a fish on the end of a hook.

Finally, the throb of an engine gets closer and closer. A familiar engine. Wolf's Harley.

Lucien puts me down at last, and the headlights of Wolf's bike light up his face. There's no expression on it, and my heart twists, my vision wavering as my eyes fill with tears. I don't know what to say, or how to make it better, because I don't know what's wrong and he's not telling me.

Something has happened and it's terrible.

"Luc," I whisper, my last plea.

Finally, a brief spark flickers in his eyes and he lifts a hand, fingertips brushing over the star of my necklace before dropping to his side again. "You need to forget about me, Astrid," he says in a low voice. "Forget you even met me."

I swallow, the lump in my throat getting bigger and bigger. This can't be goodbye, can it? It can't be. I mean, we said goodbye at the cabin, but I knew I was going to see him again. He was going to come to me.

This time, though, it feels permanent.

This time it feels like forever.

“No,” I say thickly, trying to blink away my hot tears. “I can’t do that.”

The spark in his eyes goes cold and he looks at me suddenly as if I’m an insect that’s crawled out from under a rock. “You were an asset,” he says icily. “A source. That’s all. Understand? And now I have what I want, I don’t need you anymore.”

I know he’s lying, yet the words twist like daggers inside me. I want to deny it, tell him that what we had was more than that, and while he might not need me, I need him, but Wolf’s bike roars up beside us, and the moment is gone.

Lucien looks away from me. “Take her,” he says to Wolf. “She’s served her purpose. She’s the club’s to deal with now.”

Then without another word, he turns his back on me and stalks back down the driveway toward the house.

I stare after him, shock pulsing through me, my stomach dropping away, razor wire wrapping itself around my heart.

No. No. No.

“Luc!” I scream after him. “Luc, wait!” I go to run, but strong arms wrap themselves around my waist, holding me in place. “Let me go,” I say desperately. “Let me fucking go, Wolf!”

But he doesn’t. “We have to leave, Addie,” he says, an edge of gentleness in his voice. “We have to leave right the fuck now.”

I can hear more engines, more cars approaching, but I don’t care about them. I don’t care about anything but the man who dumped me on the side of the road then disappeared into the dark.

“Now,” Wolf growls, and with rough hands, he puts me on the back of the bike and before I can say anything else, he peels off up the road, the engine roaring, the wind grabbing my hair and tearing Lucien’s name from my lips.

Making ice of my tears as they run down my face.

We ride into the darkness, and when I open my mouth, it crawls inside me, making a home for itself in my heart.

Soon, it will swallow me whole.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

WOLF

Her small hands hold me tight as we ride into the night, and I want to howl my triumph to the sky. Finally, she's where she was always meant to be, on the back of my bike, and all courtesy of that tattooed motherfucker who came out of nowhere and nearly got her killed.

I don't give a fuck about him, though.

He gave her to me and now she's mine, and I'll protect her.

And I'll kill anyone who gets in my way.

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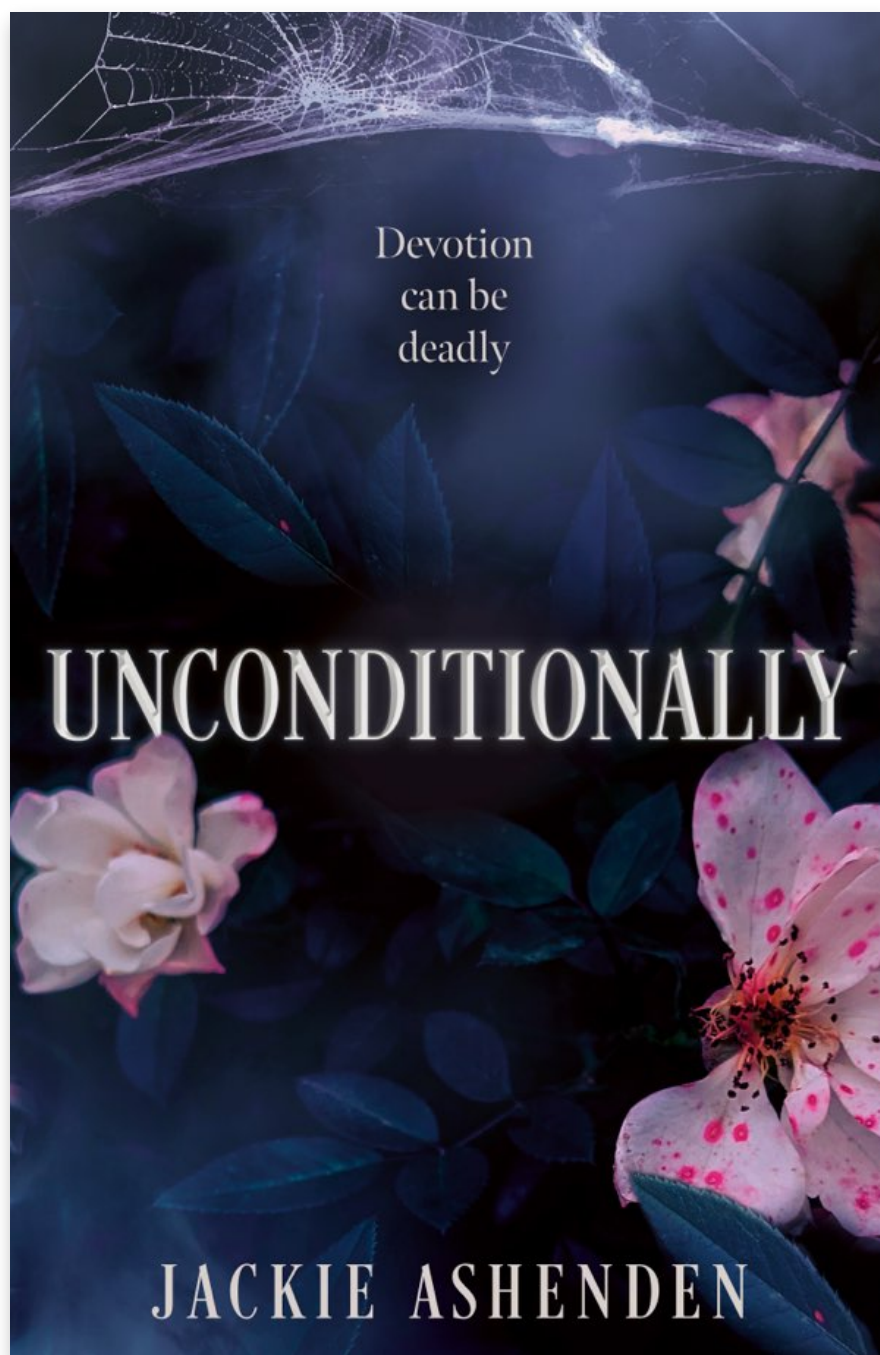
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Prologue

ASTRID

I'm a pain slut, and I say that not to be derogatory. No, I say it because pain is my escape. Pain makes me feel real and solid and grounded. But what if pain is the only thing there is? What if there is no end to it? What if pain is the default?

What will be my escape then?

There is no answer and there will be no answer.

Not until I see Lucien again.

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Chapter One

WOLF

When I ride, it's total freedom. It's like fucking flying. It's just you and your bike, and the road unrolling in front of you, the wind in your hair and in your face. Nothing can touch you. Nothing's important except for the ride.

This ride, though, is different, because I have the woman I've been in love with for fucking years on the back of my bike, my best friend Astrid Starling, and she's got her arms around me, holding onto me for dear life as I gun the Harley's engines.

I've dreamed about taking this ride for a long time, but in my dream, Astrid was there because she wanted to be, because she loves me and riding with me is all she ever wanted. But that's not what's happening now. She's there because Lucien fucking Frost dumped her on the side of the road and told me to take her somewhere safe, then he walked away. Astrid tried to go after him and I ended up having to fight to put her on the bike.

I don't know what the fuck's happening with him or why he called me to come pick her up right the hell now, but what I do know is that we've got a complicated situation on our hands and there was no time to discuss it. I hate that fucking guy, and there's something going on between him and

Astrid, something I don't like; but if it's her safety he's worried about then I'm on board, because her safety is also my concern.

The road unwinds ahead of me, forest on either side as I head back into Blackwater. Astrid's got her arms around my waist now, her body pressed against my back, and I can feel her warmth, and it's so fucking tempting to believe she's here for me.

But she's not.

After the firefight at the factory, when we rescued Astrid and her dad, Elias Starling, the chief of police from a bunch of mafia fucks, Frost took her away, leaving me, the chief and a few heavily armed strangers to clean up the mess he left behind.

I had no idea who those strangers were, and no time to chat, not with Elias freaking out about what had happened to Astrid and where she was, and who was the guy who came out of fucking nowhere and took her away. All I could tell him was what I knew, which was that the guy was a mob enforcer and I'd assumed he was working with the Morettis, the people who took Astrid. Then again, considering he blew half of them away, I'm likely wrong. Elias didn't know about the Morettis, and the only reason I did was because we'd clocked their interest in us about a week ago. We figured they were sniffing around our arms operation, and considering Astrid and the chief are crucial to that operation, their kidnap confirms it.

Anyway, I managed to get the chief back home and told him that Astrid would be okay, and that was only because I saw the way Frost carried her out of the factory, real careful, like she was made of china. I don't know what she is to him, but I know for sure now that he's not the stalker she told me he was, not after the way she screamed his name and tried to go after him just now.

The chief wanted to know about the Morettis, so I told him, then said I'd find out what I could and get back to him. I also got a couple of the

brothers to come in and fix the front door that had been kicked in by those mafia assholes.

Couple of hours after that, I got the call from Frost. Come and get her, he said. Now. So, I got the fuck on my bike and rode straight to the address he gave me, some fancy-looking compound in the woods just out of town.

She was there, in the dark, on the side of the road, pleading with Frost about something. But he was ignoring her, telling me that he was done with her and that she was the club's to deal with now. Astrid was crying, and when he turned to walk away, she tried to follow, but I had a bad feeling sitting in my gut that if we didn't go now, the shit would really hit the fan, and we shouldn't be here when it did. So I grabbed her, put her on the bike, and now we're racing into the dark, heading to my crib, which is an apartment above the club's garage where I work as a mechanic.

I'll have to tell Sawyer, the club president, that I have her, but not immediately. Not tonight. Not after having the tip of one finger cut off by some mafia fucks in an abandoned factory. She needs to go somewhere quiet first.

It takes me half an hour to get back to Blackwater, but that's because I'm taking back roads that only the locals know about, just in case anyone tails us. We're lucky, though, and there's no one around as I pull up outside the garage and get off the bike. Astrid just sits there, her long pale hair a tangle of curls hiding her face from me, but I catch a glimpse of her cheek. It's wet with tears. Christ, I'm going to rip Frost's fucking head off the next time I see him, because it's clear he's done something to her, hurt her in some way.

I want to demand that she tell me how he hurt her, but she's in no state for me to go off at her about that, so I keep a lid on my burning fury as I lift Astrid off the bike. She doesn't protest, going limp in my arms, and turning her head against my chest, and I fucking ache at how small and vulnerable

she is in this moment. I ache for how badly she's been hurt, and not just by the Morettis, but by whatever fucking Frost did to her, too.

Still carrying her, I fumble around with the metal front door, then get us inside.

It's your usual workshop, with a long workbench and tools on the wall. A red T-bird is up on a mechanical jack, and there are a couple of bikes I'm in the middle of fixing. A set of steel stairs lead up to the second floor where my apartment is, so I carry her up and into the living area.

It's not fancy, my apartment. It's mostly open plan, with a few walls here and there, and furnished with mostly second-hand furniture. I don't spend a lot of time in it since I'm always at the club, but it's pretty comfortable, if I do say so myself.

I've got a beat-up brown leather sofa sitting in the middle of the living area so I set her gently down on it, then hunt around for something to cover her with since she's only wearing a blue dress with a short skirt and black tights, and she must be fucking freezing. But I'm not really a guy who goes for interior decorating, so I don't have any of those little blankets that people drape over their couches, and I end up hauling the comforter off my bed and wrapping her in that instead.

"Sit tight," I say. "I'll be back."

Then I go downstairs and haul the bike off the street, since I don't want to advertise that I'm home, before checking over the locks on the doors and windows, just in case we get any unwanted visitors. When everything is locked up as tight as I can manage, I go back upstairs.

Astrid is sitting on the couch where I left her, hunched over as if in pain. Her hand is probably hurting like a bastard, but I have a feeling it's not that that's making her curl in on herself. It's something else. Something Lucien fucking Frost-shaped, I bet.

The thought doesn't help my fury, but Astrid doesn't need me being a prick about it. Right now, she needs more pain meds, a hefty slug of Jack,

and sleep, all of which I can manage to give her.

I go into the bathroom, find her some painkillers, then grab the bottle of Jack from the cupboard in the kitchen, plus a couple of glasses since I could use a drink myself, and return to the living area.

She doesn't look at me as I come back, her shoulders still hunched.

I put the glasses on the table and pour us each a double. "Here," I say, pushing the glass in her direction, along with a couple of pills. "More pain meds and some bourbon to wash them down with."

Again, she doesn't move. She sits like a statue, staring down at her knees.

I hate it when she's upset. I'm a mechanic, which means if something's broken, I'll want to fix it, but I don't think I can fix this. Astrid isn't an overheated engine or broken electrics, or fused pistons. She's a woman who needs comfort, and I'm shit at that kind of thing.

I blame my dad. He wouldn't have known kindness or caring if it bit him on the ass. He only knew how to deal out violence, and I learned that from him. But it was Astrid who taught me what care and gentleness was, and how to be kind. How to empathise with someone. How to be a friend.

That's what she needs now, a friend.

Except Astrid ceased to be a friend to me a long time ago.

There wasn't one moment, more like a series of them. The sight of her hair in the sun. The way her eyes sparkled when she looked at me. Her smile. And when puberty hit, the curves of her body. All of that led to a growing sense that I wanted more from her, that I wanted *her*. But I knew she didn't feel the same. So I said nothing. I was a stupid fucking teenager who had no idea how to articulate his feelings, and I ghosted her instead.

It wasn't until high school that we reconnected, and by then I'd decided that her friendship was too important to me to risk telling her how I really felt about her, and so we've been friends ever since.

"Addie," I say softly. "Addie, look at me."

It takes her a moment, but then abruptly she looks up. Her grey eyes are red, her cheeks shiny. Her glasses are fogged. "He said I was just an asset." Her voice is hoarse. "Just a fucking asset. And now he has no use for me."

I assume she's talking about the prick, Frost, and the agony and bewilderment in her voice wraps around my heart and squeezes tight. I want to ask her how she met him and who he is, and who he is to her, but it's not the time for questions. What's obvious is that she feels something for him, and he just walked away from her.

I'll kill him, I'll fucking kill him.

"But he's lying," she goes on, staring at me as if she's trying to convince me, though I think it's herself she's trying to convince. "He's fucking lying. I'm not just an asset to him, I'm not."

Oh yes, she has feelings for him. She has feelings for some tattooed mafia motherfucker and that knowledge is a punch to the gut, winding me. I want to fucking punch something, but again, that's not going to help her, so I grit my teeth and try to hide my fury and disappointment.

"Take the pills," I say, my voice getting rough. "Drink the bourbon."

She blinks, sitting there for a long moment as if she doesn't know what to do with herself. There's a lost expression on her face and fuck, I've never seen her look that way before, and I fucking hate it, because I don't know what to do to make it better.

"Addie," I say, sharper this time to cut through her shock.

She blinks again, takes a breath, then glances down at the pills and the bourbon as if she doesn't know what they are. Then, just before I remind her again, she reaches out, stuffs the pills into her mouth and knocks the entire glass of bourbon straight down. Then she puts the glass back on the table and shoves it in my direction. "More," she says thickly.

"I don't think that's—"

"I said fucking *more*." Her voice low and hard and furious. Now there's nothing in her eyes but a slow building fury, and I've never seen that

expression either. It's not that I haven't seen her angry – I have, and plenty of times – but not this level of fury, and certainly not aimed in my direction.

I don't take orders from anyone, not these days, but now is definitely not the time to be getting on her case about it. So, I say nothing and pour her another glass of Jack, which she downs as quickly as the first, before shoving the glass at me again.

"Last one," I say, because shit, she's not much of a drinker and she's small, and three doubles straight down aren't going to do her any favours. "Slowly this time," I add as I slosh some more liquid into her glass.

She ignores me, downing half of it then choking and spluttering before having to put the glass back on the table. I find myself fussing like a mother hen, going to find a tea towel, then crouching in front of her and using it to wipe her face. She takes no notice, staring off into space, the grey of her gaze sparking with anger, though this time it's not at me.

I take her pointed chin in my hand, then slide her glasses off, and carefully wipe her wet cheeks. Then I wipe the fog from her lenses before repositioning them on the end of her nose again. She just lets me do it, not saying a word.

"So." I put down the tea towel. "Are you going to tell me what all that was about?"

She ignores me, jerking her chin from my grip and reaching for the rest of the bourbon.

"Astrid." I can't keep the sharp note out of my voice no matter how hard I try. "Are you going to tell what the fuck is going on or what?" Turns out I need some answers after all, especially if she's in as much danger as Frost seemed to intimate.

She swallows the rest of the bourbon and then finally looks at me. "Not tonight, Wolf. Please." There's a note of desperation in the words that makes my chest ache. "I just need to go to bed."

Fuck, I can't push her, not when she's had a pretty goddamned traumatic evening. If she's still in danger from the Morettis, she'll be safe here tonight at least since they don't know she's with me. At least, I presume they don't know.

"Okay," I say. "Then tomorrow. You're staying here for the night, though. No arguments."

She only nods then asks, "Dad?"

"He's fine. He's at home."

Again with the wordless nod, but the tension in her shoulders eases. "I'm so tired, Wolf," she murmurs. "I'm so fucking tired."

I sit down on the couch beside her, pull her into my arms and hold her, because while I can't do anything about whatever shit is hurting her, I can at least give her a hug. I'm used to physical contact with her and my self-control is pretty good, so a hug is not too difficult. Though, every time she's in my arms I can't help but think what it would be like if she stayed there. If my hands somehow found their way beneath her clothing and stroked her.

Yeah, I should not be thinking about that shit now.

Astrid relaxes against me, her head against my chest and we sit like that for how long, I don't know. But then I realise she's fallen asleep, so very carefully, I lift her up and carry her through to my bedroom.

Luckily, there are clean sheets on the bed, so I lay her down on the mattress, tug her sneakers off, then pull the comforter over her, tucking her in like a child. She makes a soft sound and curls up, and then the only noise is the sound of her breathing.

Christ. What a fucking shitshow.

I go back into the living area, deal with the glasses, then check the messages on my phone. They're from Sawyer asking about the Morettis and what went down at the factory and where Astrid is, and I know I should reply to them right now. But I also know that if I do, Sawyer will want me

to bring her straight to the clubhouse, and that's not something I want to do tonight.

Then the buzzer at the garage entrance sounds, and I forget entirely about the texts as a surge of adrenaline goes through me. After everything that's happened tonight, I'm ready for anything. There's a camera by the front door, so I open the app on my phone and check to see who's there.

It's a woman with a black coat wrapped around her. She's got long black hair and sharp features, and when she looks up at the camera, raising one dark eyebrow in cool enquiry, as if she knows I'm looking at her, something kicks hard in my gut.

I recognise her. She was at the factory tonight, along with a few others that I assumed were Frost's crew. What she's doing here, I've got no idea, but if I want to find out, I'm going to have to answer the door.

I head downstairs into the workshop then tug the metal front door open.

She's standing casually in the darkness, in the middle of the night, as if she's lining up for a coffee in fucking Starbucks, preparing for a day working as some kind of high-powered lawyer – she's certainly got that vibe – but I'd bet my Harley she's not a damn lawyer.

I give her a suspicious look. "What do you want?"

"Friendly," she says, eyeing me up and down. "Just what I like in a man." Her voice is cool and her eyes are a very familiar shade of blue. Dark, intense, midnight eyes. Like Frost's. "Are you going to invite me in or what?"

I ignore this. "You were at the factory tonight. You got some information to share?"

She inclines her head like she's Catherine the fucking Great. "If you invite me in, I'll certainly tell you."

I'm not overly happy with inviting a complete stranger into my workshop in the middle of the night, and especially not given what's

already happened. Plus, Astrid being here and asleep upstairs. Then again, I need some answers, and she might have them.

I glance down at the coat she's wearing then back up at her again. "You armed?"

"Of course," she says without hesitation. "But you're safe, I promise."

"Like a little girl like you could hurt me," I say, just to mess with her.

She only gives me another cool smile. "Oh, you'd be surprised."

I suspect I wouldn't be surprised at all, but I need to know what's going on, so I shove myself away from the door and gesture her inside. As she goes past me, I'm conscious that she's tall, not as tall as I am, naturally, but certainly taller than Astrid, and she smells of something warm and delicious, vanilla and caramel. The thing in my gut kicks harder, which is fucking weird since there's only one woman that gets to me in this way and she sure as shit isn't this woman.

I shut the door and follow her into the workshop. The woman looks around the workshop curiously, before moving over to Carl Kelly's T-bird that I've nearly finished with. "Nineteen-fifty-six Ford Thunderbird," she murmurs, running long fingers delicately over the gleaming red paintwork. "Very nice."

Surprise shifts inside me. She doesn't look like a woman with an interest in classic muscle cars. She looks like a woman who'd prefer something sleek and European, like a Ferrari.

"You like cars?" I ask watching her as she circles the T-bird, a half-smile on her face.

"Let's say my father had an interest that he passed on to me." She pauses then finally turns to me. "You're Wolf."

It's not a question, so I don't answer.

"You're Astrid Starling's friend and you're a member of the Hellhounds MC."

"Congratulations," I say. "You know me. Now who the fuck are you?"

If my tone annoys her, she doesn't show it. "Thea Frost," she says, as cold as her name. "I'm Lucien's sister."

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He has a reputation. A dark possessive side.

I know he'd hurt me. But maybe that's what I want...

WHITE AS SNOW

I never wanted to hurt her. She should've known to stay away from me.

But there's something about her innocence that I desire.

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Jackie Ashenden is the *Publisher's Weekly* bestselling author of over 80 books and prefers writing sexy, emotional contemporary romance with alpha heroes who've just got the world to their liking only to have it blown wide apart by their kick-ass heroines.

She lives in Auckland, New Zealand. When she's not torturing alpha males and their gutsy heroines, she can be found drinking martinis, reading anything she can lay her hands on, wasting time on social media, or knitting yet another jersey.



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Ciara Briggs

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Liane Payne
Dean Russell

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eCommerce

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