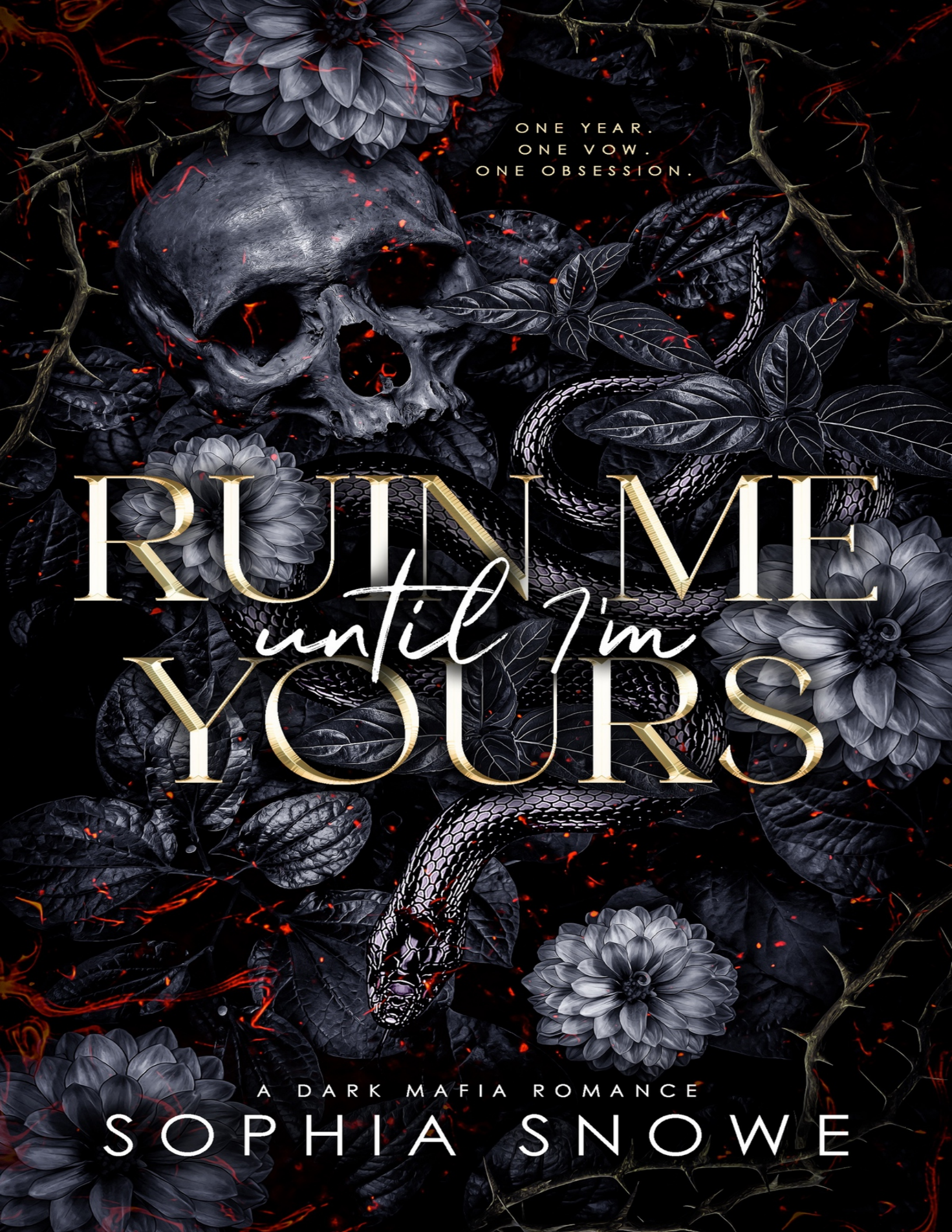

ONE YEAR.
ONE VOW.
ONE OBSESSION.
RUIN ME
until I'm
YOURS
A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE
SOPHIA SNOWE

# RUIN ME UNTIL I'M YOURS

*OceanofPDF.com*

# MEN OF RUIN SERIES BOOK 1

**SOPHIA SNOWE**

*OceanofPDF.com*

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*To the women reading fiction because no man in real life will steady your hand while you slit a man's throat, then fuck you beside the body—*

*Your standards aren't high.*

*They're six feet under.*

*Meet Laszlo Novak:*
*mortician, stalker, husband,*
*and a walking restraining order with excellent aftercare.*

*You're welcome.*

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# CHAPTER 1

Laszlo

The room is dark, and the only source of light comes from the small lamp above, shining on the face of a woman who died several days ago. Wendy Green is lying on the table, her skin grey, pale—and very much dead, which means I need to make her look alive and serene for the funeral tomorrow.

I glance at the makeup set, all the brushes lined in perfect order, and lift the cover. My family and my men don't question me anymore. It was odd for them at first, me working in the mortuary with my hands on corpses that can no longer complain or voice an opinion about why the hotshot Novak boss is personally giving them their best look for their last sendoff.

Everyone expressed their concern years ago when we opened the first funeral home, when I stared at the corpse of an old associate whose hand and chest had been blown apart by bullets. We didn't even have any staff then, so I told them I would take care of it myself.

My mother, Constantine and Rafe refused to come downstairs, but I felt at peace there, perhaps because of the quiet. Because I could hear myself think in the silence, as I busied myself with the dead. Each time I worked on a body, my heart rate picked up and I was so fucking excited to be the one to do this. So much, I had to keep doing it, over and over.

Since that first time, I have always been the one to get the job done. Prepare the dead for a dignified wake, then burial. That is my trademark.

I pick up the brush, open the powder container and start applying it to the woman's face. She has wrinkles everywhere, and a little powder spills on the metal table. I inhale sharply, telling myself to keep going, that I can clean it later, that first I need to sort this woman's face, cover the slowly decomposing skin, since the family has requested an open casket.

A bead of sweat tickles my brow as I gently stroke the brush over her cheeks. This is so fucking peaceful, being the caretaker of the dead, even when I was the one taking their life. The dead don't speak, don't argue. They don’t expect anything, make impossible demands. With them, I'm in my element.

But my ritual, the sacred peace and quiet I acquired so quickly, is broken by a knock on the door. I straighten instantly and a little powder drops on my sleeve.

"What did I tell you about interrupting while I'm working, Daniel?" I say, staring at the specks of powder on my clothing. My outfit is ruined now and I have to fucking change.

"You told me to inform you five minutes before the timer goes off on your roast duck, Laszlo," Daniel says, sounding bored. “You said if I forgot to do that you’d put me in the oven next to the ruined thing. Remember?” He yawns. I should be offended that he's not scared of me, but I suppose that’s fair. He's never seen the other side of me—the violent one—directed at him.

"I'll be there now. Just need to change," I tell him, and he leaves, shutting the door behind him. I put the powder and brush down, make sure the whole set is still aligned and perfectly positioned, then push Wendy inside the fridge and switch off the light. Wendy can stay here for a little while, and later I'll get back to her, to finish her off.

I chuckle to myself, thinking that was a nice little joke. Fuck, I'm hilarious sometimes.

I shake my head, then leave the mortuary.

I'm thirty-eight years old and my mother keeps telling me that I am too concerned with how things appear, and that includes my looks. She calls my obsession with control OCD, and I should get it checked out. She's wrong—

this has nothing to do with that. I just like things in order, and the fact that I have powder on my light blue shirt is driving me up the wall.

The house is located in the Hudson Valley, outside of New York, specifically Bedford, a perfect moody setting for the business. When I bought it, the place had already been renovated into a funeral home, and the mortuary was in the basement. How lucky is that. This place always fascinated me, but my mother refused to live in it, and so did my father, but they visit often. We have five other funeral homes scattered around the state and beyond, too, but this one is my favourite.

I walk into my bedroom and remove my shirt. The reflection in the mirror doesn't disappoint me. I work out a lot and my hair is sleek, dark and curly, from my mother's Italian side of the family. Maybe I'm a cliché half-Italian mafia man in his thirties, but who fucking cares when I sleep like a baby at night?

I pull a new navy t-shirt on and head downstairs. Dolores passes me on the landing and gives me a smile.

"You look good in blue, Laszlo," she says.

"I look good in every colour, *carissima*," I tell her with a wink. She rolls her eyes at me and mutters something I cannot make out. She knows I like using Italian endearments with her to earn points in her eyes. I love her, she brought me up, and she knows I get a kick out of acting like an arrogant prick sometimes.

The garden smells like rosemary, roasted duck, and, if you pay attention, blood.

The table is set on the terrace the way I like it when I have guests—white cloth, candles even though the sun hasn't finished going to sleep, more silverware than any reasonable meal requires. My mother sits with her back to the roses, pearls on, wine already poured. My brother, Constantine, is on her left. Rafe, one of my innermost circle of trusted men and pretty much family, is filling the wine glasses right across from him. The servants come out of the house in a quiet line, carrying dishes, setting them down, disappearing again.

It's the tail end of September. The light goes early now and the air has turned; Dolores has had the torch heaters brought out and didn’t need asking.

On the far side of the lawn, past the rose beds we feed with the ashes of those who wrong us, a man kneels by the fountain with his wrists tied behind his back. Two of my men stand over him. From here his face is just a dark smear. Up close, I know, it's worse.

I take my seat at the head of the table and shake out my napkin.

"Laszlo." My mother doesn't look up from her glass. "Why is there a man covered in blood on the other side of my son's garden?"

"Because he stabbed Nicko, *Mamma*."

Rafe stops pouring mid-glass. Constantine's knife stills against his plate. Why he feels the need to bring his own fucking blade to a meal is beyond me.

My mother's hand comes up to her necklace. "Nicko."

“Twice in the stomach, once in the shoulder, once through the hand when he tried to keep the blade out of his gut. Julien broke his jaw with the barstool on the way down, for good measure." I nod at the duck as a servant sets it in front of me. "He's in surgery. Dad is at the hospital with him."

"Then I should be there, too."

"After dinner. There's nothing you can do there except terrorise the nurses."

She gives me a long look, then picks up her fork.

We eat. That's the part that might be hard to believe—that we just sit and eat, under such circumstances, discussing stabbings and death as though making observations about the weather. The duck is perfect, if I say so myself. The potatoes are crisp and flavorful with the addition of goose fat—my mother praises the texture while moving food around to keep her hands busy—and forty feet away a man watches us do it, because I told my men to point him at the table.

Halfway through my second helping, I set my glass down.

"Constantine. Bring him over. He's too far away to join the conversation."

Constantine wipes his mouth, pushes his chair back, and crosses the lawn like a man who's been asked to move furniture—it’s the inconvenient expression on his face that gets on my last nerve. The men, directed by my brother, bring the prisoner over between them, and he leaves a crooked track through the grass where his feet won't cooperate.

They put him down on the tile at the end of the table, close enough that I can smell him over the earthy rosemary and sweet orange. Copper. Sweat. And underneath it, sharp and human, piss. He knows we can smell it, but that doesn’t bother me. I like the odor of human fear; it gets me going. Perhaps even more so than the culinary masterpiece I just concocted.

Up close, I note the split brow, a nose that's been introduced to something hard, a lip swollen fat as a thumb. Young. Expensive haircut under all the blood, a watch worth more than the men holding him earn in a year. Of course I know who he is. If he were someone else, he’d already be in the ground, under a few layers of cement. I wouldn’t even bother to fix his face beforehand, or make sure his body was found. Nobody touches my family and lives to have Schubert’s Ave Maria played at his funeral Mass or service. Unless you’re this guy… lucky bastard.

"You're dead," he says. The words come out cracked, so he says them again, louder, as though volume will fix it. "You're all fucking dead! Do you know who I am? Do you know what my father is going to do to this place? To all of you?" His teeth are pink when he shouts. "You're already dead! You just don't know it yet."

Lucky, arrogant weasel.

His eyes keep leaving us. They go to the spade leaning against the fountain. To the folded sheet of plastic next to it, weighed down with a stone so the evening breeze doesn't take it. Every time they land there, his threats get louder.

A servant sets the sauce boat down behind him and he flinches so hard, the gravel rattles under his knees.

I eat while he performs. The duck really is one of the most scrumptious things I’ve ever eaten.

"Would you like some?" I ask, when he pauses for air. "Duck. It’s…” I kiss my fingers most passionately, “chef’s kiss. That’s me, the chef. You look pale."

"Laszlo," my mother says.

"What? Look at him. When did anyone last feed him?"

He spits at the table and grins like a fucking lunatic, a pathetic attempt to mask the fear. It lands well short of the cloth. I decide not to take it personally.

"My family will take this house apart," he rasps. His voice is shit, but he swallows and keeps going. "They'll put every one of you in the ground. Your men. Your mother. Your—"

I set my knife and fork down on the cloth, side by side, perfectly parallel.

The servants stop where they're standing. Constantine turns his head.

"Careful with your face," I tell him.

He blinks at me.

"Whatever expression you're wearing when you die is the one I'll have to fix. I do the makeup here." I pick up my wine, satisfied with how well I make unpleasant conversation on the spot. Doesn’t matter if I mean it or not. "I'm good, but I'm not a fucking magician."

The colour drains out from under the blood. His mouth keeps moving and nothing comes out of it for a second. Then the rage comes back to cover it, higher-pitched this time, filthier, his knees drumming the gravel.

"Not at the table, Laszlo," my mother says. "The language."

"You heard her. Constantine."

Constantine folds the napkin off his own lap—he's been holding it this whole time like he knew—and jams it between the Valmont boy's teeth. The threats keep coming. Muffled now. You have to admire the commitment.

That's when the shouting starts on the other side of the house.

Not his. A woman's.

Daniel comes around the corner first. Daniel, who once watched me rewire a dead man's jaw while finishing a sandwich, looks rattled. Far from bored this time. Behind him, two of my men are trying to hold on to a woman, and they're losing.

"—your hands off me— Let him go. *Let my brother go!*"

She comes around the hedge fighting, one man on each arm, and everything in my head—the powder from earlier, the crooked track in the grass, the sauce spot on the cloth I've been not looking at since the second course—goes quiet.

I suddenly feel as if I'm back in the mortuary, filled with the stillness of death.

But only for a moment.

She's wearing scrubs and trainers. Dark green, creased from a long shift, a hospital badge clipped to her waistband and flipped the wrong way round. Hair shoved into a tie that gave up likely hours ago. There's a coffee stain the size of a thumbprint on her sleeve, fury all over her face, and she is, without question or competition, the most alive and beautiful thing that has ever stood in this garden.

I'm on my feet. My chair goes over behind me and I leave it where it falls.

"Take your hands off her!" I bark at my men. This comes out low and fast and wrong, almost like a growl. The men let go of her instantly, as if she's caught fire. Constantine looks at me, but I ignore him because I'm already in awe. Possibly in love…

Only not possibly.

Daniel clears his throat. "Sir. The Valmont daughter. She came through the gate before we could—"

*Manon.*

I pick up my wine and say nothing.

She doesn't look at me or any of the others. She crosses the terrace like she owns the deed to the house and drops to her knees in the gravel beside her brother. Her hands are already working—tilting his chin, thumbing an eyelid up, two fingers pressed under his jaw. She pulls the napkin out of his mouth and throws it on my lawn.

I watch it land crooked on the grass, and feel nothing at all.

Interesting.

"Manon—" her brother croaks. "You can't be here. Go home. *Go*—"

"Shut up," she says gently, while she checks the split in his brow with her thumb.

Then she stands, wipes his blood down the front of her scrubs like it's nothing new, and turns around to face a garden full of armed men and one mafia family mid-dinner.

"Which one of you is Novak?"

Everyone at my table very helpfully looks at me. So much for suspense.

"That would be me," I say, stepping around the table.

"Let my brother go."

"Good evening to you, too." I gesture at the food. "Have you eaten? You look like you came straight off a shift."

"I'm not hungry, and you're not funny."

I'm extremely funny. Everyone on my payroll agrees.

"Your brother," I say, "walked into my club, picked a fight with my cousin, and stabbed him four times. Nicko is in surgery right now. He might live. He might not. Either way, your brother did it on my turf, in front of a few dozen of my people and allies." I stop an arm's length from her. "You grew up in the same world I did. Tell me what the rules say should happen next."

Her chin comes up. The pulse in her throat is going hard but her voice comes out flat and level.

"I know what the rules say."

Wrong answer. The right answer, the one I've heard a hundred times in a hundred rooms, is *please*. People beg here. They cry, they find religion at remarkable speed, they offer me their houses and their savings and their sad little souls. She stands on my terrace, with her brother's blood drying on her scrubs, and tells me she knows the rules.

I like her—no … no … as I've already touched on, I'm fucking in love with her already. That's inconvenient.

"Name a number," she says. "Whatever he cost you. The hospital bills, the club, all of it. My family will pay."

"Look around, Doctor. I bury half of this city. Death pays better than anything your father moves. I don't need Valmont money."

"Territory, then. Routes. My father will deal—"

"There is nothing your father has that I want."

She switches tack without blinking. It's like watching a surgeon switching instruments.

"Your cousin. Nicko. He's critical—I heard them saying his name on the way in. That's how I figured out what was wrong. I'm a surgeon. Whatever team he has in there, I'm better. It's not how things are usually done but these are extraordinary circumstances. Put me in that operating room and I'll fight for him like he's mine."

For one long second, I genuinely consider it, just to watch her work.

"He has the care he needs."

"Then *what*—" and there it is, the first crack, hairline-thin, right down the middle of her voice. She seals it shut so fast I almost miss it. She swallows hard, her eyes wander back to me. She has such pretty eyes. "What do you want? Everyone wants something. Name your price."

Nobody at my table is chewing anymore. I know silence—silence is the family trade. Graveside silence. Viewing-room silence. The silence across my desk while a widow decides between oak and mahogany.

This one beats them all, because this one is waiting on me to break it.

I close the last step between us and force myself not to bend my head and breathe her in. All of her. This close she smells like hospital soap and antiseptic, and underneath it, where the disinfectant gives up, apricots. Warm skin and apricots, twelve hours into a shift, while my whole life smells of lilies—funeral flowers, cold flowers, flowers dying slowly in refrigerated rooms. She stands in my garden smelling like something much brighter and sweeter than any flower.

I want to keep her.

There's a spot of dried blood on her knuckle. She doesn't back away from me. Men twice her size step back from me. She tilts her head up to hold my eyes instead, and heat rolls through me, slow and completely inappropriate for the setting. There's a man crying into my gravel three feet away and all I can think is that I want to know what her fury tastes like.

"Marry me."

Somebody's fork hits china. My mother says my name once, low, like a warning shot. The brother comes up off his knees and gets exactly nowhere—Constantine doesn't even put his wine down to shove him back onto the gravel.

Manon stares at me.

Then she laughs. One short, hard note with no joy in it anywhere.

"You're bloody insane."

"Frequently described that way, yes."

"This is a joke."

"One year," I say. "You marry me. Papers, ring, my roof, the whole world watching. In exchange, your brother walks out of this garden tonight, keeps

breathing indefinitely, and the blood he owes for Nicko, wiped clean. Twelve months from the day you say *I do*, you're free."

Her eyes go past me. To the fountain. To the spade, and the folded plastic with the stone sitting on top of it. She's a smart woman. She doesn't ask what it's for.

"You don't even know me," she says.

I don't answer right away.

"Consider the year an introduction."

"Laszlo." My mother again. "Think about what you're—"

"I have."

Somewhere behind me, Dolores mutters a mix of prayers and curses in Italian and, God love her, starts setting another place.

"A year," Manon says, as if weighing the weight of the words. Her brother is saying her name over and over and it’s pretty obvious she isn't hearing him. She's looking at me like she's searching for the trick, the trapdoor, the fine print written somewhere on my face.

"One year," I say. "That's all I'm asking for."

*It's not.*

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# CHAPTER 2

Manon

"You can't marry him."

Julien has been telling me this since the Novak funeral home gates closed behind us. He says it through a split lip that makes every word a project. I stare at the bandage I taped over his brow in that driveway while armed men watched me work and sigh. I feel a headache coming on, and my heart is racing. I wish he'd shut up and let me think.

"You can't," he kept going. "Papa won't allow it. The family won't allow it. Manon, are you listening to me—"

"You were kneeling on Novak's terrace not long ago with a napkin shoved in your mouth," I say. "Now you have opinions about my wedding. I wish you'd thought about all this before you did what you did."

"That's not—"

"Did you even *think* when you were stabbing that guy? Besides, you heard the whole thing, Julien. You were six feet away. Did you say anything then? When it would have mattered?" I take the ramp onto the coast road. "No. You knelt there and let your sister buy your life, and now that your neck is safe you've discovered your principles. They have wonderful timing, your principles. They always arrive just after the danger's gone."

That shuts him up all right. He turns to the window and I watch his reflection try to build a version of tonight where none of this is his fault. He'll manage it. He always does. Give it a week and he'll believe the story completely—that he was provoked, that Nicko had it coming, that I overreacted by intervening. My brother could fall down an elevator shaft and land blaming the building.

His blood has dried on my cuff. It isn't the first blood I've had on me today. Not even close. But everyone else I bled on tonight had the sense to be grateful once I stitched them shut and they came to. Not Julien.

"He's going to eat you alive," Julien says quietly, to the window. "You don't know what Novak is. You've been playing doctor in your other life while the rest of us—"

"Playing." I don't raise my voice. I learned from the best that you never need to, but damn, I want to strangle him right now. "Just zip it, Julien, or I'll do something I'll regret later."

He registers the frustration in my voice and stops plaguing me. He knows this family business always has my emotions in a twist, and I'm at the end of my rope.

Our phones have been ringing non-stop the entire drive and I haven't been in the mood to respond. I'll probably let him deal with that. Haven't I done enough?

My family's mansion appears through the trees and every window is lit. All of them, both wings, the lanterns along the drive—and my stomach drops, because nobody in my family lights the house like that at one in the morning unless there's an emergency or unusual activity they're aware of. Calls have been made, of course. They've gotten some answers.

Cars I recognize are parked three deep on the gravel. Olivier's grey Mercedes. Sandro's ridiculous American thing. The old Citroën that Février has driven since before I was born and will apparently be buried in.

The men are here. All of them.

Julien notices them too and suddenly he is no longer spilling out his opinions. He's gone very quiet beside me, and his knee has started

bouncing.

"Papa knows," he says.

"Papa knows you stabbed Nicko Novak in that club. He doesn't know the rest." Although that is bad enough… I park between the Mercedes and the fountain. "So here's what happens. Sit down, shut up, and look sorry. Fake it if you have to. I just watched you fake being brave in that garden."

"Manon—"

"Not a word, Julien." I get out of the car.

At the gates, Denis and Rémy stand with rifles slung, and neither of them will look at me straight. So many years ago, Denis taught me to swim, while Rémy wept at my medical school graduation and has denied it since. These men have always had my back. Tonight, they look at Julien's ruined face, then somewhere past my shoulder, and Rémy murmurs, "*On vous attend dans la salle à manger*," and my stomach drops the rest of the way.

The dining room.

The last time I saw my father with his most trusted men in the dining room, at a late hour, I was twelve. Unbeknownst to them, I sat on the stairs in my pjs, watching. I knew them all. Uncle Théo laughed too loudly at something in the hall, the door closed, and I never saw him again. Nobody has said his name in this house in more than two decades. His wife still sends my mother cards at Christmas, signed only from her.

Problems go to the study.

The dining room is where my family decides things.

They stop talking when we come in.

Twelve men sit at the long table, jackets off, ashtrays in front of them, smoke hanging in a flat layer under the chandelier. Bottles of expensive whiskey grace the surface of the table, but the glasses are mostly untouched. A map of the city lies spread across the middle of the table, corners weighted with random things—a decanter, somebody's phone, Février's tobacco tin—and there are pencil marks on it already. Circles. The

docks. The eastern crossings. Two streets I know, because there are Novak funeral homes on both of them. Ah, they’ve been discussing important business.

My father stands at the head of the table with his sleeves rolled, looking formidable as always. I swallow at the sight. Nothing frazzles me much, but the man has a way about him.

Henri Valmont is sixty-three and built like the men who used to load ships in Marseille, which is what his father did, and his grandfather before that. That was before the family found more profitable uses for the docks and brought the whole business across the Atlantic. He's got a wide frame, big chest and shoulders. He stands shorter than half his men yet fills a room just with his presence. His hair went silver at forty and he wears it brushed straight back. Sun-creased face, hooded eyes, a boxer's flattened knuckles, and his mother's gold signet ring on the pinky finger of his right hand.

My father has three types of looks I’ve seen him in: the suit, the shirtsleeves, and the apron he wears on Sundays to cook for forty people. The apron means you are family. The suit means business. The shirtsleeves mean somebody, somewhere is already dead and doesn't know it yet. And now his sleeves are rolled up.

He studies Julien for a long moment. The eye. The lip. The bandage.

Standing up, he crosses the room and takes Julien's face in both hands, gently, then kisses his forehead, murmuring something in French too low for me to catch. Julien's shoulders drop. So do mine—half an inch, stupid, hopeful.

The slap comes on the release. Open hand, full weight behind it, and the crack goes off the paneled walls like a shot. I instinctively take half a step toward him before I stop myself. Julien hits the edge of the table and folds into a chair. Nobody dares look at him. Everyone keeps studying the map, as if nothing has happened. Février turns his tobacco tin over twice.

I look at Julien though because somebody should, and because I've just set that nose and my father has just undone half my work.

"*Assieds-toi, fils*," my father says, unnecessarily. "And do not speak in this room tonight."

Then he comes to me, and his whole attitude changes. This is the thing about my father that people who only fear him will never understand. The tenderness is real. He can kiss Julien's forehead and break his face in the same minute and feel no contradiction at all. I've stopped waiting for him to notice one. He tilts my face to the chandelier light with two fingers under my chin, checking me the way I checked Julien in Novak's garden, and up close he smells of tobacco and cologne.

"*Rien?*" Nothing? "No one touched you?"

"No, Papa."

"Novak's men. Not one hand."

"He told them not to." I watch that sink in. "He stood up and told them, and they let go of me like I was suddenly contagious."

His eyes cut to the window and back, fast, and the hand on the table goes still.

"You should have called me, *mon cœur*."

"Because you'd have gone to war over a knife fight Julien started. And I could still fix it myself. So I fixed it."

"Yes," he agrees, almost pleasantly. "Like you do."

He gestures at the empty chair beside his own—my mother's chair, kept empty at these tables. A courtesy to a woman who never once wanted to sit there, and never pretended otherwise. I don't take it. I walk to the foot of the table instead and stand facing him down its whole length in my creased scrubs, the other men between us, and I can see him registering the situation, mulling his words, the cogs of his brain working. He's a deceptively calm man, my father, and that cold calculation in his demeanor would make the Devil shiver in hell.

"*Alors*," he says. "Tell me how my son is alive."

"Julien's out. Completely. No payback, not next week, not in ten years. Nobody's waiting for him." I hold his gaze. "And Nicko's situation doesn't change anything. Even if he dies, it's done."

*Even if he dies.* Out of my mouth like it's nothing. Like there isn't a man with four holes my brother put in him, fighting for his life.

Olivier leans into the light. He's been my father's second since before I was born; a lean, careful man wearing small round glasses, and the kind of guy who revels in paperwork. "Guaranteed how, *chérie*?"

He still addresses me with that endearment, as though I've never grown past the age of ten. But it isn't meant to be insulting. I'm his little girl after all, and always will be. Today though, his concern holds a different flavor—not simply mildly annoying, but invasive.

"By Laszlo Novak's word. Given to me directly, in front of his family and his men."

"His word," Sandro says, and ugly laughs.

Février doesn't laugh at all—that man, ninety if he's a day, who came over on the boat with my great-grandfather, nods at me across the table with his cloudy eyes and says, "Novak's word has a price. That family sells nothing cheap. Say the price."

They're all waiting for the answer, and the only sound is Février's thumbnail going around the rim of his tin. The hair on the back of my neck lifts anyway, like my body's worked out what I'm about to say before I've said it.

Last spring I stood in my office with a man whose daughter's scan I was holding, and I told him the thing that ended his world in the same voice I use to order coffee, because a level voice is the last kindness available.

I have never needed that training more than I need it now, at the foot of my father's table.

"Marriage," I say at last. "For one year, to Laszlo Novak. Then it dissolves, and everyone walks away."

Février's thumbnail stops moving on the tin. Somebody groans. My father doesn't react, which is worse.

Sandro comes out of his chair. "*Non.* Absolutely not—" and Olivier is talking over him, fast, urgent, "Henri, if this gets out before we have a chance to figure a way out, the other families will read it as surrender—" and Février's cane cracks down on the table, scattering a bit of stationery, and the old man insists that no daughter of this house goes to a Novak, not while he's still breathing… "*Plutôt la guerre, Henri, tu m'entends, la guerre plutôt que ça*…"

Yeah, better war than this, in their eyes.

And under all the commotion, Julien, who was ordered to silence, is now murmuring my name in a dejected tone, as if he has any right to sound wounded.

Half the men are now out of their chairs, spouting arguments in French at once. I stand in my spot without chiming in. I did my screaming already, earlier today. Twenty minutes on the road with the windows up, before I composed myself and went to get Julien. My throat is still raw from the bloody screaming but nobody in this room gets to see me going crazy.

I keep staring at my father. Everything else is noise.

He hasn't said a word yet. Glass untouched, watching me. His stillness frightens me more than all the chaos, because Henri Valmont in a temper is like weather, it passes, but I have seen him go quiet like this twice in my life and both times a man stopped existing shortly afterwards.

"*Ça suffit*."

Enough—that's all he says and it does its job. It's as if he's fired a round of bullets into the ceiling.

"There will be no marriage," he informs me firmly. Not a request, not even really an order. He says a thing like it already happened and waits for everyone to agree that it did. "No daughter of mine goes into that house. We will resolve the matter of Julien ourselves. Whatever it requires."

"It's already resolved," I argue, but he won't listen.

"Bullshit. That's no resolution, it is—"

"I gave my word, Papa."

The words tumble down the table, all the way to him. Regret fills me. Maybe I should not have come tonight.

"I negotiated for Julien's life and I gave my word. You know what that means. My word, the only currency this family claims never to debase. Isn't that what you taught me? What your father taught you, and his father taught him? Novak kept his promise not to hurt him further. He was going to kill Julien, but now my brother is sitting at your table with all of his body still intact. And now you want to show me that a Valmont's word bends the moment the terms sting."

"You had no authority to bargain like that."

"If I didn't, Julien would have been dead. It's as simple as that. Then it would have been payback, and more men would be dead." I don't apologize—there's nothing to apologize for. So many years of being in college, training and practicing medicine have taught me how to give a family bad news and take whatever comes back. "You were forty minutes away. The rules say a life for the blood, on the spot, on their ground—your rules, Papa, you made us recite them. Was Novak going to keep him warm until you arrived to open negotiations? I was there. So I worked with what was in front of me, which is what I do every day of my life, because the alternative would have been standing in a corridor with a perfect plan and a corpse."

"We take it back," Sandro says to my father, over me. "Tonight, with force, before this thing hardens into fact—"

"Walk me through it." I turn on him, and perhaps it's the twenty-hour shift, or the blood on my sleeve, or a lifetime of men discussing me across tables, but I am fucking done with being overlooked or dismissed. Thirty-three years of me—that's how long I've been on this earth—and I'm about sick of this state of affairs. "Really, Sandro, educate me.

"You go to war over a contract I agreed to. Men die—yours, theirs, some random twenty-year-old who doesn't even know who I am. Perhaps you even win. Probably not, because that man had the whole thing planned out

before I'd finished making my request, and men like that don't leave their obvious flank open. But win or lose, the first body is Julien's, because the moment the agreement breaks, the guarantee breaks with it." I look at them all, one after the other, furious that they question my choice to save my brother, all my false uncles. "I've spent ten years on the other end of nights that start in rooms exactly like this one. So no, I won't stand here and applaud you for finding a fresh way to get my brother killed."

"*Tout sa mère*," Février says to nobody in particular. “Stubborn, but not as quiet.” Yes, I'm much like my mother it seems, although in a different way. I’m the volcano, she’s the stream. What he says isn't quite a compliment. It isn't quite not one, either.

"I left." I'm only talking to my father now, because a bunch of idiots won't listen. "Fifteen years ago I walked out of this world and built one of my own, where now the only blood I touch is blood I'm trying to keep inside people. And it held, Papa. It held for this long until tonight, when Julien needed me to step in. One night of folly for him. That's what it cost—everything I built I have paid for, so no. You don't get to stand at the head of this table and demand a price that came out of my life and not yours. I will do this so I can stand by my choice and keep living as I have worked so hard to do."

My father remains silent for a long time. The smoke moves under the chandelier. Somewhere behind me, Julien has finally, mercifully, stopped talking once more.

"Why you?" my father finally asks.

"What?"

"Novak," he spits, decades of hatred in one word. "Think, Manon. He held a Valmont life in his hand. He could have asked for anything. Money. Territory. The eastern docks, he's wanted those for a decade. He could have asked for ten favors to be called in over ten years, and I would have paid, and he knows I would have paid." A pause. "Instead, he demands a wife to be kept for only twelve months. Did he say why?"

"No."

"Did he ask about me?"

The question sits wrong. Wrong shape, wrong angle, a question from some other conversation that has broken through to this one.

"Why would he ask about you?"

My father doesn't answer. He turns his untouched glass a quarter-turn on the map, and his eyes go to the black windows and stay there.

I brace myself for shouting and insults, but they never arrive. I know what to do with shouting. This is something else though. For some moments he isn't looking at me or Julien or the map, and whatever he's looking at instead is pulling him into some sort of darkness. Some deep-seated grudge, maybe, but it's hard to tell. Then it passes, and he seems to return to being my father again. Terrifying, yet him, as I know him.

Thirty years of feuding, I tell myself. That's all that was.

Février is watching him too, and the old man's face has shut like a door.

"Papa."

"It's nothing." His tone is smooth, present, and now he moves the glass to its original position. "It doesn't matter. What matters is this: the arrangement will not stand. Give me three days. There are other solutions."

There it is.

Other solutions. I grew up on other solutions. It's what took Thomas Berger's father out to the marina the summer I was nine, so the Bergers were gone by autumn. It's why Rémy at the gate has two fingers that don't bend. Other solutions always start the same way, with men in cars at night, and they end somewhere I'd rather not picture.

And the first solution—the very first, before any cleverness—is that the guarantee dies. And Julien follows it inside a week.

"Three days," my father says. "You do nothing. You contact no one. Above all, do not go near Novak."

I look at my brother. Julien's staring at the map, jaw working, halfway out of his mind, no doubt.

I look at my father, who has just lied to me. Not about the three days, but with his statement that this is solvable.

"Because of all this, I moved my shift to seven. Time to go and get some rest," I say, a statement which is both true and agrees to nothing.

At the door he kisses my forehead, both hands heavy on my shoulders.

"You were brave tonight," he says quietly, words for my ears only. "Stupid, but brave. You've never learned the difference."

"I learned it here." My head is now throbbing so bad, all I want to do is lock myself in my bedroom and sleep until all these problems disappear. But work beckons, and I'm not one for shirking my responsibility.

Something moves through his face that is almost a smile but I could be wrong. "Go sleep, *mon cœur*. Everything will be different in the morning."

We both know it won't be. But this family has always preferred a kind lie to a true word, and tonight I'm too tired to break with tradition.

Beyond everything, Laszlo Novak's face pops up in my head. He's watching me struggle with myself, my father, this whole fucked-up world … and then he breaks into laughter. Hearty, unbridled, from the gut. So animated for a man who deals with the dead on the daily.

A man who makes people dead.

I groan as I leave, an inner sound that never escapes my lips.

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# CHAPTER 3

Manon

Wendy Green is still in the fridge, and I have been awake since four this morning thinking about a woman who isn't dead. A woman that is etched in the very fabric of my being. I had a dream about her and woke up hard. Like a teenage boy still learning his way around his dick.

By nine in the morning, my house is filled with men who are discussing my personal life.

Rafe stands in front of my desk with his jaw set and doesn’t seem particularly pleased with the fact that I acquired a wife. Behind him are three of my captains, all of them apparently confused by the fact that they are in my office, yapping about *we discussed this in the car*.

I hate when people talk about me behind my back.

"Nicko's jaw is wired shut," Rafe says.

"I know. I paid for the wire and all the other items on the medical bills," I tell him.

"And the boy who did it walks."

"The boy who did it is at home in his father's house, drinking his father's whisky and probably telling people he escaped." I move the pen on my desk a half inch to the left, where it should be. "Or maybe not. But if that’s the

case, how long do you think he'll enjoy that story once his sister is standing in a church wearing my name?"

"I don’t get why you’re marrying a Valmont."

"I'm marrying Henri Valmont's only daughter. Short engagement. Big church. Both families in one room in their best suits." I look up. "By tradition, the bride's father pays for half. I intend to make it a very expensive wedding, Rafe. I'm thinking of swans and acrobats in those tiny little shiny bikinis."

One of the captains, Jerry, snorts and turns it into a cough when I glance at him.

Rafe doesn't move. "The men want blood for Nicko."

"The men can have cake and some vodka instead."

"Laszlo."

"Ask them what they'd rather watch. A funeral nobody attends, or Henri Valmont standing up at a wedding, in front of everyone he has ever done business with, giving a speech about how happy he is?" I lean back. "One of those he'd get over."

There is an awkward silence after that and no one dares to say anything. I'm disappointed by the lack of comments. Then the youngest one decides this is his moment. Tomek has had a captain's seat for eight months and the suit for six, and he delivers his verdict around a mouthful of *paluszki*, a bag of which he has taken from my kitchen without asking, the way he empties every fridge he has ever stood near. He is getting salt on my floor. I let him live, for now, because I want to hear what a man eating my stolen breadsticks thinks I should do about the Valmonts.

"So while here they're busy with the wedding, we take the river warehouses."

"Tomek,” I say, trying to stay fucking calm if no one gets me.

"It's the perfect—"

"Tomek." I don't raise my voice. There's no need to, not with him, not over this. "Say one more word about the Valmonts and I'll have to plan a funeral and a wedding in the same month. The flowers get confusing."

He shuts his mouth at last.

"Wonderful. Go and see Nicko. Tell him I sent grapes."

Rafe stops at the door. "His jaw is wired shut."

"I know. The card says "chew *slowly*."

They leave. Constantine stays.

He's in the chair by the window with his ankle on his knee, eating an apple he took out of my bowl, him also without asking, also predictably. He hasn't said a word all morning. From Constantine, that's screaming.

"Go on," I tell him.

"Nope."

"Say it."

"I've said it. I said it Thursday night. I said it in the car, I said it on the stairs, and I said it outside your bedroom door at one in the morning to a man who pretended to be asleep." He takes a bite. "Eleven minutes."

"What does that even mean?"

"That's how long it took you to get engaged to this woman. I was standing next to you with her brother's napkin gag still in my hand, inspired to keep time." He chews. "The docks were on that table. The river. Henri would have signed over half his shipping to get that idiot back in one piece. And you asked for a wife."

"Marriage is a merger."

"Don't insult me." He points the apple core at me. "I've been at your shoulder for twenty years. I've watched you make grown men thank you for taking their houses. You never ask for the thing you want, that's your whole religion. Thursday, you asked for it in the first sentence."

"You're upset because I didn't consult you."

"I'm upset," Constantine says, "because for seven years I've been occasionally driving to a hospital car park at odd hours for a man who told me never to question him, and Thursday night that woman walked into your garden and I watched you stand up."

Constantine is handsome, and lean, but as far as I know he doesn't have a girlfriend. He's noticed that I never stand up for anyone before.

"Everyone stood up," I say. "We all heard the shouting and I needed a better angle, to make sure I didn't miss anything."

He arched an eyebrow. "The woman stormed into the garden with no fear, and that rarely happens." He throws the core into my fire, which he also knows I hate. "You stood to your feet though before she even said a word."

His gaze feels like it's drilling into my soul.

"Are you going to tell me?" he asks.

"Eventually."

He nods once and lets it go. He won't push. Pushing was never his way. He's leaving me all the room in the world to answer or not. That's the thing though. Rafe I can lie to all day. Tomek I can frighten into quitting with a word. Constantine just sits in my chair eating my fruit and lets the silence settle, because I can't fool him. He can tell when something's changed in me. He just can't tell what.

Still, I'm not going to tell him yet.

"Everyone stood up," I say again.

"Mmm." He reaches for a second apple, not looking at me now, which is how I know he isn't finished. "You don't say *eventually* about nothing."

I don't take the bait. I could dodge him all night, so instead I give him the smallest true thing I have, something easy to swallow.

"Dolores has declared war on me, apparently." When she's angry with me she stops taking my orders. She might have raised me but today, I am

pissed. She has been picking up after me since I was in diapers and has never once let me off the hook when she thinks I misbehave. Today is not going to be the exception. "Maybe she should be your housekeeper."

Constantine lets me have that one and adds, "You've been out of your damn mind. Besides, she laid a place for the woman. Thursday night, in front of everyone—plate, glass, napkin—and she walked out of the garden without sitting down." He stands, apple in hand. "It's a personal offence. It's still there, Laszlo. She won't let anyone clear it. She's making bigos tonight. The punishment is bigos, and she's bloody Italian."

"I'll speak to her."

"You'll grovel to her, or we're all eating cabbage until the wedding."

* * *

Feldman arrives at two with two associates and his phone in hand, which he sets to record on my desk. He looks at me until I nod. The attorney has taken care of my legitimate paperwork for eleven years and has never once asked a question that wasn't relevant. That's why he still has my business—that and the fact he's efficient.

"A prenuptial agreement," he says, "and a private contract of terms. Term of marriage, one year from the ceremony."

"Correct."

"Division of assets at dissolution?"

"She keeps whatever I've given her."

"And in the event of your death?"

"She gets everything."

The young associate stops typing. They all seem confused by this and I don't know what the issue is. It's my wishes that matter, after all, not their opinions. In this line of work, they must have heard it all.

"Everything," Feldman says.

"Everything. Ahead of my father, ahead of the family. If I die on the wedding night, she's the richest widow in New York by breakfast." I think about it. "Some people would call that a motive. Add a clause—if I die violently, the estate holds until it's cleared up. I won't have her inconvenienced."

"So you don't want your widow inconvenienced," Feldman says slowly, "by everyone assuming she killed you for the money."

"Now you've got it."

He writes for a while.

"Next," I continue. "She keeps her job, and her hours. Her own bank accounts, her own name at work. Her own car—which someone services every ninety days without telling her."

"Without telling her," Feldman repeats.

"It would only worry her to know it needs it. Her brakes were worn down in March. She never noticed. I'd like to keep it that way.

"Feldman opens his mouth, then stares at the recorder. Closes his mouth.

"Nobody in my organization speaks to her unless she speaks first. Every house I own is open to her, no locked doors, no schedule. If she wants to leave a dinner, a party, a country, someone drives her and nobody reports where. Her brother can come in to visit her but he needs to ask my permission first. I told him to disappear but I know she cares for the fucker. Her father, never. Her mother, whenever she likes—put that one in using warmer language."

Constantine is sitting on the sofa scrolling the sports pages on his phone. He’s allowed in here … but then puts the phone down and stares at me. I don’t even know why I asked him to come here with me. That was stupid.

"And nobody comments on what she plays in the car."

"Why would a driver comment on—"

"Next clause."

Feldman shuffles his notes together. "Mr. Novak. Forgive me. Normally an agreement like this protects the client from the spouse. This one protects the spouse from everybody, including your own family, and I cannot find a single term in it that benefits you. I'm obliged to ask what you're getting."

"A wife."

"For a year."

"Those are the terms."

Feldman writes *consideration: marriage* and underlines it twice, and I decide I'll be leaving him something in the will as well.

"There's one problem," he says. "The employment clause is unenforceable. Her hours belong to her employer. Her hospital sits inside the Meridian Health Group—four hospitals, two research institutes—and if Meridian decides to move her, cut her department, put her on nights for a year, this contract can't do anything about it. Her schedule isn't within your control."

The room goes quiet again.

Constantine groans and drags his hand through his face. "No," he says. "Whatever that is. No."

"How much is Meridian?"

Feldman blinks at me. "It's … a private hospital group, Mr. Novak. You'd be looking at hundreds of m—"

"Find out. Use the Aldona trust. My name doesn't appear on any layer of it, and I want it agreed in principle by Friday."

The young associate has his hands still over the keyboard again.

"Type," I tell him.

He types.

Constantine folds a piece of paper he picked up into a small, hard square. "You're buying a hospital."

"I'm buying a healthcare group. The hospital comes with it."

"You met her on Thursday."

"Luckily, nobody bought it on Wednesday."

"Normal men send flowers." He drops the paper on the table. "Rich men send diamonds. You are purchasing the woman's *employer* so nobody can move her shifts without your signature, and she is never going to know."

"Correct on every point. While you're here, send a case of Soplica to the Valmont house. The good one, from the cellar. Addressed to Julien."

Constantine stares at me.

"With a card," I say. "*Thank you for your service.* No name."

"He'll think it's a death threat."

"Perhaps he'll be cautious for a few weeks. Then he'll say fuck it and drink it. Then he'll feel odd about having drunk it." I sign where Feldman points. "His temper got me a wife. Somebody in this world should thank him and it certainly won't be his father."

Feldman packs his briefcase very carefully and stands.

"Congratulations on the engagement, Mr. Novak."

"Thank you. She doesn't know about the hospital."

"I gathered that without being told," he says, and goes off to bill me for the afternoon of his life.

* * *

Nicko is sitting up, furious and holding a whiteboard. The man does look battered. There are bruises everywhere and I'm surprised he can even hold that board.

He writes: *GRAPES WTF?*

"Chew slowly," I tell him, same words as on the card.

He writes something else, and my mother takes the pen off him before he can turn it round.

She's been here since Thursday night. There's a rosary on the blanket, three coffees on the windowsill, and a nurse in the corridor who now flinches at the sound of breathing in this room. My mother has decided that Nicko's recovery is a project she personally manages, and God help anyone from the anaesthetist to the janitor.

"Sit," she says to me. "Eat something. You've gone thin."

"You think I've gone thin in two days."

"You've gone thin since Thursday." She hands me a pastry out of a paper bag, then keeps hold of my wrist for a moment longer than she needs to. "So there will be a wedding, Laszlo."

"Yes."

"Such an important decision, made between duck and dessert. In the presence of a man bleeding all over the grass."

"You raised me to make the best out of every situation."

"She didn't eat." She lets go of my wrist and starts moving the coffees on the windowsill into a line, which is where I get that quirk from, whatever she likes to call it when it's mine. "Dolores put a plate down for her. The girl never looked at it. She had her eyes on her brother, on you, on the fountain, and she said yes with her hands shaking. When she left, you sat back on your chair and continued to cut into your duck."

"It was a very good duck."

She sighs. "Laszlo."

"Would you like to help with the flowers?"

She turns and stares at me until it gets unnerving. My mother is very beautiful, and I look like her. She's always at these family things yet never really there with her mind. I've spent my whole life trying not to turn into her. She also isn't stupid, and nothing in this family gets past her twice.

"You stood up," she says. “When she came in.”

Not her, too.

"A woman was shouting. I wanted to see why."

"There is always shouting. You have never once stood up for anyone, for anything." She folds her arms. "So tell me why my son, who has never hurried toward anything in his life, is suddenly in a hurry to marry a stranger. I was starting to think you preferred men."

In the bed beside her, Nicko writes something on his whiteboard and turns it so she can read it and I can't. She laughs. I start pacing before the two of them can gang up on me any further.

I shake my head. Gay? I'm sure she suspects I fuck Leah—she's seen her once or twice on my arm. In fact, I do it every Tuesday evening, on the clock.I know how to use my dick on a woman.

While I ponder a comeback—she truly has me speechless—my father shows at the door and nods to me, so I walk out with him.

He's slow on the stairs. The illness took forty pounds off him seven years ago and gave most of them back, but he takes the corridor like he's got all night. We're through the doors and under the car park lights before he says anything.

"Say her name."

"Manon Valmont."

He stops walking.

"Manon," he says.

I understand he isn't hearing it for the first time, but I had no idea he’d also figured it out.

"You know her name."

"I've known her name for seven years."

"How?"

"I asked." He says it like I'm being slow. "I was flat on my back with a tube in my chest and they'd told your mother to start making funeral arrangements. Then somebody pushed for more tests. So I asked who. A nurse gave me a name. I had it checked, because I'm not an idiot, and the answer came back as Manon Valmont." He looks me in the eye. "Henri's daughter saved my life and I've never once said it out loud to you or anyone."

I stand there trying to work out where to put that admission. Of course, he isn’t the only one who secretly knows.

Seven years. I found her name and built my existence around it since. The whole time he’s known as well, and neither of us ever mentioned a thing.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I know you." He starts walking again, towards the car. "You'd have tried to pay her. You can't pay a Valmont, so you'd have found some other way to settle the debt, and I didn't want you anywhere near that girl. You had a temper then. You'd have made it worse just by turning up."

"And after? You've had a long time to disclose that info."

"After, I decided it was safer in my mouth than anywhere else. You say a name at a dinner, somebody hears it, and one day a man who hates me knows exactly where to find the doctor who kept me alive." He shrugs. "I thought I was the only one keeping quiet about her."

The doors slide open behind us and somebody's family comes out into the light and walks past us.

"How long have you wanted her?" my father says.

"That's not what this is."

"Laszlo." He stops at the passenger door and turns round. "You've lied to me since you could talk and you're very good at it. You're not good at it tonight."

A car pulls into the row behind us. A woman gets out with a child on her hip and hurries to the entrance.

I don't answer him.

He doesn't ask again. He looks down at his shoes for a while, and when he lifts his head, he's got the face he wore that time they told him how grave his condition was.

"Then listen to me. That girl has a life. A job, a home, a name that isn't in anybody's file in this big old city. She got out of her father's world and built her own destiny. She's now stepping into some shit, thanks to you." He points at the building behind us, at the window where my mother's standing. "I'm alive because of her. So whatever this marriage is, whatever you're doing and I'm sure you know exactly what you're doing—be certain it does not cost her that life. She goes back to it at the end of the year with everything she came in with at least."

"She will."

"Say it properly."

"She'll have her life."

He watches me for a second longer than is comfortable, then puts his hand out.

I take it. It's an old man's hand now. The grip isn't weak, though.

"Good," he says. He lets go, then says, "Does Henri know yet?"

"Since Thursday night."

My father looks out across the car park and smiles.

"Put me at the front," he says, his eyes twinkling. "Where he can see me."

* * *

Wendy Green comes out of the fridge at midnight.

I wash my hands, roll my sleeves, and set the brushes out in a perfect line. That's how I like them. The powder went everywhere on Thursday because a man knocked on my door about a duck, and now there's a Valmont in my

life and a case of vodka on its way to her idiot brother. I can lose myself in this routine for a while.

"Sorry about the wait," I tell her. "It's been a week."

She doesn't mind. That's the thing about Wendy. She's got nowhere to be until eleven tomorrow, and she has never once asked me a question. Down here my hands know the work without me, and my head finally goes quiet, because nothing is even a millimeter out of place.

I work the powder over her cheek, lightly, the way it's done, the way I'd already started before being rudely interrupted the first time. The open casket was the family's idea and they'll stand there tomorrow telling each other how well she looks.

"There's going to be a wedding," I tell her. "You'd have had something to say about it. Everyone else does."

The lamp hums over the table. Down here, at this moment, there's no noise, no drama. There's a face that needs doing and there's the correct order to do it in.

"She thinks the year starts on the wedding day," I tell her. "Well, that's what I said."

The brush moves. The room is so peaceful. Wendy Green keeps whatever answer she may have to herself, which is the only reason I said it out loud.

"I've been waiting…" I murmur. Indeed, I'd have waited forever.

Luckily for me, it didn't come to that.

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# CHAPTER 4

Manon

I always thought Charles and I were meant to be together, that we'd get married eventually. After four years, I was still waiting. He never actually asked.

"Say it again," he says. I've just told him I'm marrying another man.

"I've explained it three times, Charles. That I'm getting married to someone because my father is in the mafia business." I'm so matter-of-fact about the whole thing.

"Just repeat it. So it makes sense."

He's right. It cannot make sense to him as it's outside his frame of reference. But he's making me work for it and I'm about to blow my top. Granted, this has been like dumping a bag of trash over his head.

His hands are flat on the counter, taking up too much of my kitchen. There's a butterfly stitch over his eyebrow, put on by a team doctor in Vancouver on the last road trip. Four years with a hockey player and I've stopped asking about the new marks on his face. I'm staring at it instead of him.

"My family is part of a criminal organization," I confess. I wasn't planning on doing things like this, but being that our relationship was serious, I knew I'd have to tell him some day. That day is today. There is no leeway to keep dragging this out, especially with the current turn of events.

"Manon. Your dad's in shipping. He's not a criminal."

"He is in shipping, yes," I say, inhaling a deep breath to keep the exasperation from my voice.

Half a beat passes and he doesn't move. Maybe they're finally sinking in, the words hanging in the air between us.

I'm such a chicken. We've been together so long, and I never told him. Not on the third date, when he asked what my father did and I said shipping. He took that to be true, of course. Why wouldn't he? Not at Christmas either, when he visited my parents' house and never once questioned more in depth how my family got their money. They know how to deal with outsiders like Charles and act like upstanding citizens on the surface. Then too, not at his sister's wedding, where he introduced me as Manon, a doctor—the only sentence about my background I've ever wanted said out loud.

Charles shakes his head then lets out a laugh. No, it apparently hasn't sunk in yet.

"Last Christmas there were two guys keeping watch on the drive all night, standing in the cold. I thought they were staff," he says.

"Hmmm, well, they were staff."

Nobody in my family has ever lied to him. My father is indeed in shipping. The men on the drive were staff. Every word in these statements are technically true and not one of them honest. I was fluent in lying before I could ride a bike.

"We've been together for four years, Manon," he says.

"I know."

"Four years, and you have been lying to me—"

"Well, at the time, there was no need to tell you any of it. And it wasn't lying. Just omission."

"What? I don't understand."

"At eighteen, I told my family I didn't want to be any part of it. Never took a dollar off them after that. I took out student loans and I’m still paying them like everyone else. I built my life on my own merit so I'd never have to stand in a kitchen saying any of this to anybody, and it worked for fifteen years." A small sound escapes my lips, a half-sob, betraying me. "Fifteen years of not wanting to associate with my own family except for the social aspects on holidays and the occasional conversation. That's not a thing you celebrate."

"It doesn’t explain not telling me."

"No. It doesn't."

He looks at the ceiling. I do love him, and we could have had a great future together, but not anymore.

"Julien," he says. "Where was he Thursday?"

So I tell him, in the voice I use when I'm telling a wife her husband isn't waking up—flat, slow, no surprises … because if I let any emotion into it I don't think I could stay calm for long. I talk about the club, about Nicko and Julien stabbing him four times.

"Why isn't he in custody?"

"Because there were no police at the scene and it was all handled internally. Novak's people took care of my brother." I put the coffee down. "They had him on his knees, gagged, about six feet away while the whole family was dining in the garden, eating duck."

"And you did what?"

"I went to speak to them and managed to get him back."

"How?"

My hands are steady, but I want to scream at Charles. We have been over this and over this, and I have been very patient.

"I agreed to marry the man who was ready to kill Julien in that garden, in front of his mother and his brother." Charles has stopped moving entirely.

"Laszlo Novak... He owns several funeral homes. The funerals are the legal half of his business."

“You’re marrying this guy.” Charles scratches his head and then laughs. God … and we were doing so well. I think I need to leave now. Then his eyes widen. "Let's go to Montreal, to my mother's place," he says with such nervous excitement in his tone. "We'll be on a plane by lunchtime—"

"You can't be serious. If I go, they take Julien and just kill him," I say, still wanting to fucking scream. "Maybe not now but when he's forty and has forgotten all about it."

"Then let him—"

He doesn't finish the sentence and that's good, because I think I would have walked out if he had.

"Marry me," he says instead. What the fuck is going on here? Am I in some kind of matrix? My head is spinning.

Oh, Charles. This man is not getting this and I feel like I'm talking to a brick wall.

"City hall opens at eight-thirty. Whatever this guy thinks he's owed, he can come and discuss it with me."

"He'd kill you."

"Let him try."

"He wouldn't try," I state with the utmost tolerance. "He doesn't try. Trying is for people who might fail. It would be done on a random day by a man you've never met, and on the following Sunday he'd be at church or playing with his kids. There wouldn't even be a body. Yours would just be gone, and your mother would never get answers."

Charles's pale expression tells me he's finally caught up. God...

"There's a box in your sock drawer," I say. "Navy. Under my sweater. I found it in November, put it back exactly where it was, and never told a soul, not even Daphne.” Daphne was my friend at the hospital, who very ironically worked at the morgue as a technician. She joined the staff not

long ago, but somehow our paths crossed and we hit it off right away. She was the only person I can say I enjoyed hanging out with during breaks on my shifts. “I've been waiting since Christmas for you to get on with it. If you'd done it in April instead of waiting to get down on one knee in some picturesque setting, then all this would be moot. Then again, it wouldn’t bode well for Julien, either..."

"Then fight it. With me. Together."

"Charles, if you are anywhere near me when this starts, he will kill you. Not to punish me or to send a message but because you'll be in the way, and he removes things that are in the way, then nobody will be able to prove a thing." My breathing is so loud in my ears. "I need you to go. For good. New number, new place. Don’t tell me where. Ideally, change teams and move to the west coast. Sorry it had to come to this."

He picks his jacket up off the chair, but doesn't put it on.

"A year," he argues. "You do your year, and when it's done, I'll be here."

I huff. "That's not what I'm asking. That’s not safe."

"I know what you're asking. I'm not doing it," he says.

Exasperated, I nod but say nothing. Then I leave because I have a shift at the hospital and my patience has run out. Charles keeps calling after me, but I tell him we'll talk tomorrow. Hopefully, by then, I'll have my wits back together.

I glance at my phone, wondering when my father is going to summon me, but there's been nothing in the past two days. At the hospital, there are enough distractions, thank goodness. It's a long shift. The scaffolding collapsed on a site and we had several broken limbs and two requiring emergency surgery. That's just the first few hours, but I don't mind this at all. When I'm at work I'm in the zone, and I try not to think about my personal life. A huge bonus right now.

It's almost midnight when I finish and change. My mind is racing and I'm exhausted. I walk straight out to the parking lot toward my car, trying not to think about Laszlo Novak, but to my utter surprise I see the very man—

yeah, him—standing right opposite my car. He's leaning against what is most likely his vehicle with his arms folded, waiting.

What the fuck.

He's obviously waiting for me.

What is he even doing here, and how does he know where I work?

"Doctor."

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"You were going to say something, but the answer's still no."

Why is my heart racing all of a sudden? It's dark, but I would recognize this man anywhere. He has a particular aura about him. He has a paper cup in each hand. He offers me one. Coffee, probably.

"Cortado. Two sugars, which is a crime."

I don't take it. But I take a good look at him because I didn't the last time, not properly. That day there was a spade by a fountain and my brother in obvious distress and I couldn't have picked this man out of a lineup if my life depended on it.

I can now.

He's not the biggest man out here, and he doesn't need to be. He's clearly the type who gets up at some ungodly hour to earn a body like that, which is annoying on its own. His hair is dark and thick, a bit curly, short at the sides and longer on top, and I want to get my hands into it, which I resent immediately. The jaw is a problem. The nose has been broken at least once and set by someone very good, so it's almost too perfect, and the little bit that isn't is somehow worse. Then the eyes. They have no business being that blue in a face that dark, and right now they are fixed on me. Every instinct I have says look away. I don't. I've never lost a staring contest to a man in my life, and I'm not starting with this one.

The worst part is that he's beautiful. Not handsome. I could deal with handsome. This is worse. He knows he's beautiful, too, standing there in a coat that cost more than my rent, holding two coffees like he's posing for something. Meanwhile, I've just walked out of that building looking like roadkill with my hair shoved up in a pen. I want to wipe the look off his face almost as much as I want to straddle him.

I study him too long and hate myself for it, because my ovaries have clearly decided something the rest of me didn't agree to. In my belly, the butterflies have woken up without asking me first, and my reproductive system is taking a gander at this man—this criminal, this stalker, this lunatic who somehow knows exactly where I work—and giving him a standing ovation. My body has betrayed me, and my ovaries are leading the coup.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Twenty-two minutes. There was a moth situation."

"Don't be entertaining. I've had a long day."

"I know about the accident." He drinks from the cup I refused. "Get in the car."

I frown, because what else could I do? Certainly not kiss him or … do other things. "I'm not getting into your car." And what the fuck am I on about?

"Why not?"

"I've seen a documentary." Because it's true.

That gets him. A short laugh escapes before he can stop it, and he hides it behind the coffee.

"Heated seats. Excellent stereo."

"I'm sure the last one thought so too."

"Nobody has ever died in this car." He considers what he just said, then confirms. "Not one person."

I have to exercise superhuman effort not to roll my eyes. "Fascinating. Goodnight, Mr. Novak."

"Laszlo."

"Goodnight, Mr. Novak."

He doesn't follow, doesn't step into my path, doesn't do a single thing I've braced myself for since his oh-so-romantic marriage proposal.

"Your brother's nose," he says when I've got the door to my car open. His voice is level, calm. "You set it yourself, didn't you? After you left my house."

I don't say anything. I get in, lock the doors, and sit there with both hands on the wheel for a few seconds before I trust myself with the ignition. Why is he even mentioning this? Setting a nose is child's play for me.

Without a word, I drive off.

He follows me for twenty-two minutes out of the hospital. Not close, a few car lengths back, using his blinker at every single turn like a man with nothing to hide. I run a light I shouldn't and he waits it out. I take the east exit, which isn't my way home, and so does he.

After a while, I'm not frightened any more. I'm so angry I keep grinding my jaw.

There's a strip past a container yard where the road runs above the water. I came here the night I told my father about medical school, and after my first death on a table. Nobody knows about it. Not Julien, not Charles, not one living person I know.

I pull in hard and I'm out before his headlights have finished sweeping the fence.

"What is wrong with you?" I shout at him.

He takes his time to park, then gets out and stands there, looking out at the water.

"Your driving was unsafe and I was concerned about you. I wanted to see if you'd stop."

"There are men doing eight years upstate for this."

"None of them had my lawyer. And we need to talk, which I'm not doing in a parking lot where a security guard named Marvin can hear me."

"There's nothing to talk about. I said yes. You get your paperwork, I get my brother, and I'd rather not see your face until whatever day is chosen for me to keep my promise," I say, wanting to leave badly.

"Right," he says. "That's the conversation."

I fold my arms around myself. It's freezing, but we need to get this over with. Maybe then he will finally leave me be.

"Is your cousin alive? Nicko."

"Awake. Jaw's wired, but his mind’s alert. He wrote something extremely rude on a whiteboard about grapes."

His cousin is awake and rude. Both good signs. But the jaw isn't what I'm worried about. He took two blades to the gut and it's day four. Day four is the dangerous one. If something's going to go wrong, this is when it shows up. Nobody dies of the stab itself. They die a few days later from an infection everyone missed because they were too busy being glad he lived.

"Fever?"

"You're asking me about his temperature."

"I'm asking if he's septic."

"No fever." He's watching me as he's trying to read me, and it's unnerving. "He's the reason your brother was brought to me."

Your brother. He's poking the guilt I've been sitting in, reminding me whose hand held the knife. Except he's got me wrong. His cousin is not a Novak to me but a patient that needed saving.

"He's a man with a perforated bowel," I say. "That is the only part of him I am interested in, not his name."

He laughs, a real laugh, not the smug one he's been using on me, and for just a bit he looks like a completely different man. My heart trips and I stop myself. No. Absolutely not. This man cannot have that kind of effect on me.

"I don't think you understand what is happening, Manon. Well, maybe it's my fault since I didn't explain it properly. You think this marriage is just paperwork. City hall on a weekday, two witnesses off the street, twelve months of separate bedrooms."

"That's what you offered."

"That's what you heard." He walks along the fence, stops when I don't follow, comes back. Which annoys me, because he is just stretching the moment. "There will be an engagement party. A proper engagement to which everybody who matters is invited. Then a church—not a small, modest chapel, but the big one on the hill with doors that take two men each to open. Swans, if I can get them past the insurance."

Did he just say swans? No chance. He cannot be serious. I can't even.

I'm already in deep shit. I thought this would be easy. Instead, Laszlo Novak is standing here describing a full cathedral wedding, with swans. I try to picture my father raising a champagne glass to any of this and my brain simply refuses. And from the look on his face, he's nowhere near done.

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# CHAPTER 5

Laszlo

"Swans?" she says.

I fucking love the way she says it. Like I've suggested we get married on the moon. Like swans are the thing in this conversation that doesn't make sense—not the engagement, not the church or the fact that she's standing in this place off the beaten track with a man she agreed to marry four days ago. Swans. That's where she draws the line.

"I have hopes and goals. No half-assing."

She folds her arms tighter. The wind is pulling her hair across her face and she keeps dragging it back. She does that a lot—tucks it behind her left ear first, and it never stays. I could tell her that. I won't.

"What is the point of any of this?"

"Your father standing up in front of every man he's ever done business with, glass in hand, telling them how happy he is about the marriage. Can't you see it too? I know you can."

She looks surprised by what I just said and then turns away. Good. She should be mulling things well. Because this is the part where she stops thinking of me as a man who made a deal in a garden and starts thinking about what I actually am, which is a man who finishes things.

The water hits the stones below us. Slap. Slap. On the far bank the cranes are still lit green, moving containers that belong to her father's company. I know his business down to the last crate. She doesn't need to hear that tonight.

"He'll never agree to this."

I say nothing. Sometimes that's the cruelest or at least most impactful thing you can do.

"He's had four days. He'll have found a way around it. He always—"

"He agreed on Saturday."

She stares at me with disbelief and anger. Her whole face changes when she's trying to work out whether I'm lying or telling the truth. Her eyes narrow and she purses her mouth, like she's physically holding words inside. I've been thinking about that mouth for most of this conversation, and not one of those thoughts has been decent.

"That can't be true. My father detests your family."

"My lawyer drove the terms out to him himself. Your father asked for two changes. A church instead of a hotel, because his people would read a hotel as an insult. And a longer engagement." I put my hands in my pockets. "So it doesn't look rushed. Then I got to thinking about the swans, because why not? Might as well go all out."

She has her phone out. I don't think she's decided to call anyone yet. Perhaps it was just an instinctive move, much like when my hands go to a collar or a cuff when something inside me needs straightening.

But then she suddenly makes the call and puts it on speaker. The ringtone goes twice and her father picks up.

I hear his voice say *mon cœur* through the speaker, and there it is, that hot ugly thing under my ribs that I get whenever someone has a piece of her I don't. Jealousy. Of a sixty-three-year-old man. Of her own father. He calls her that. He's always called her that, and I have a recording of him saying it from a tapped call eighteen months ago that I've listened to more times than a sane person would, because I wanted to know what it sounded like when

somebody spoke to her with that kind of warmth. And also because I am not, by any clinical definition, a sane person.

"Saturday, Papa. Yes or no?"

"Manon—"

"Yes or no."

"Yes."

I turn half away and fix my stare on the cranes. Not because I'm being polite, but if I watch her face right now I'll see her pain, I'll see her breaking, and fuck, I don't like seeing her upset. I have watched her handle worse than this. I have watched her take phone calls at three in the morning that would have put most people in a state of hysteria or numbness, crumbling to the floor. Even if those things happened to others, they had to take a toll, but she has never once let anyone hear it in her voice. I know… I had no right to hear those things. I have no right to know her this way, but I do.

She's talking to her father now. I catch pieces.

"You asked me for three days."

His voice, tinny through the speaker, said something about roads and her brother in the ground.

"You asked him for a longer engagement."

"Manon—" No endearment this time, but he used the same tone.

"I bought Julien's life and drove home thinking you'd at least let me get on with it. Get the show on the road asap so it’ll be done quicker. But no. You had to go and negotiate my marriage contract instead so you can save face."

Her voice doesn't rise, but I can tell this is the tone of a woman who's given up on the man on the other end of the line.

He changes the subject abruptly to Sunday lunch and flowers. She hangs up.

I keep staring at the cranes. There's a container swinging out over the water, green, forty feet, and I count slowly to three before I turn back.

"You could have let me find that out when I go there on Sunday."

"You'd have spent more days trying to figure out the way out of it, and I don't enjoy watching people wait for things that aren't coming. Also, I'm not a nice man and I wanted you to hear it from me."

She turns on me with her whole body, her eyes wet and furious, and she's shaking, so fucking beautiful that I actually lose my train of thought, which hasn't happened since I was fifteen and Aurelie De Luca bent over in front of me in chemistry class.

Except this is worse than Aurelie De Luca. This is worse than anything. Because this woman is about to insult me and I already know I'm going to enjoy it. My cock is halfway to hard, which is extremely inconvenient timing, because the last thing I want is for her to see how she's affecting me, and I'm standing outside in the kind of wind that doesn't hide a single fucking thing.

"Do you want to know what you are? You're a textbook narcissist with a God complex and a good tailor. I work with men like you every day. I just usually get to cut them open. You're not complicated, Novak. You're a man who presses his own shirts and thinks that makes him interesting."

"Dolores presses them, actually—"

"Everyone in your life is either scared of you or paid by you. You've been obeyed for so long you've started mistaking it for being loved. That's not power, Novak. That's just a very expensive way to be lonely."

Right.

Right, okay.

I should be offended. I should be doing the thing I do when somebody speaks to me like that, which is going very quiet and watching them realize what they've done. Except what I'm actually doing is standing here with a hard-on that could pummel a gourd to dust, grinning like a lunatic because nobody has dared to speak to me like that practically ever. Apparently I've

decided that being psychologically dismantled by a five-foot-seven woman in hospital scrubs is the most attractive thing that has ever happened to me.

I need to get a fucking grip. Literally and figuratively.

She's still going. She hasn't even paused for breath. And she's moved closer somehow, right up into it instead of backing off. Anyone with sense would take a step back from me. Every Valmont I've ever met walks straight at the thing that could hurt them, and she's no different, whatever she tells herself.

She's very close now. Close enough that I can smell her. Hospital soap, and then just skin, just her, warm and a bit sweet, like apricots, and it’s making me dizzy. Pathetic, but I don't care.

She's looking at my hands.

"I've heard that you work on the bodies yourself, even though you have people for it."

I'm flattered that she's researched me, but more so I love the way she's looking at my hands. I have to admit, I do have lovely hands.

"Apparently you don't deal with paperwork, only the face and hands of the corpses. You spend hours under a lamp, on a stranger, doing work others can do for you."

Nobody has ever described what I do like that. Not my mother, who finds it disturbing. Not Constantine, who would rather be attacked by fire ants than come to the mortuary. And she didn't get all of that from a rumor. She's a doctor. She'd have caught the formalin on me the moment I handed her the coffee, and worked the rest out for herself. That smell gets into everything. What gets me is that she isn't disgusted. She's looking at me the way she'd read an X-ray, taking me apart to see how I work.

The wind pushes her scent at me again and I let the silence run longer than I should. I need a moment, because what I want to do is put her on the hood of my car and I'm running out of reasons not to.

"You're right, I'm a textbook narcissist," I say. "With a God complex. I'm genuinely flattered. Usually I just get a sociopath, which is lazy and

clinically inaccurate. Impressive." Oh, I'm loving this game way more than I should.

"Do you think this is funny, Mr. Novak?"

A little funny, I suppose. A lot hot… My cock twitches, giving a solid salute as it responds to her voice, her words, her tone, her existence…

"I'm hilarious, but that's for another time. That was the best thing anyone's said to me in years and I want you to know I'm going to think about it in the shower later." I grin at her. "Say the bit about the shirts again. I liked the bit about the shirts."

"You are an actual child."

"And yet here you are, standing in the dark with me instead of getting in your car. Which one of us should be more worried about that?"

"You don't know a single thing about me."

That statement almost makes me laugh. Properly laugh, but if I tell her this it would blow the whole thing apart because I know even what brand of shampoo she likes to use and I know she can't sleep without the window open. I also know she was twelve minutes late to work on the fourteenth of March because she stopped to help a man whose dog had been hit, and I know the dog lived, because I checked.

She thinks I've had four days to patch up some information about her. Four days. Right.

Fuck me.

"You take your coffee ruined. You read at traffic lights, which will kill you before I do," I blurt out, because I can give her a few details and make them sound like I've done some homework and that's it. Still, I'll tell her enough to make it unnerving—"You haven't slept since Thursday and you weren't sleeping before then either, because you're on nights the first week of every month. Must be impossible to adjust, isn't it?"

An expression crosses her face that makes my stomach drop. She's scared, but not of me—she's scared of the fact that I know things about her that

nobody's supposed to know, and she hasn't worked out yet whether she wants me to stop or keep going. She doesn't know the half of it…

Her lips are parted and her breathing has changed. She's looking at me wide-eyed, like I've walked into a forbidden room she forgot to lock, and I'm the last thing she'd ever expect to see there.

I would burn this whole city down to keep that look on her face.

"Four days," I lie, "and a very expensive researcher."

She believes me. Fucking hell. Because the alternative—her working out how long I've actually been watching her—would end this conversation and probably involve the police. Of course, there's the fact she's a Valmont, and it's my business to know what my rivals and their families are doing. But that's besides the point.

"You just met me."

"That's right," I say, hesitating and nearly fucking blow the whole thing, because she's standing three feet away telling me when we "met" while adding things up in her head and obviously coming short of a good answer.

The reality is, it's been seven years. Seven years of knowing her name, her face, her schedule, her coffee, the sound of her laugh through a restaurant window. Every little thing about her I've learned and archived in my mind. Tiny details a husband would know, the soul closest to her that's not living inside her. And she thinks it started on Thursday. The lie burns through my chest. "Come here."

"No."

So I approach her instead. I'm a masochist and want to be close to her. I walk slowly, cognizant of the fact that she's a woman alone with a man she doesn't trust on an isolated strip of land by a dark body of water. I give her every opportunity to step back.

She doesn't move. Doesn't step back. Hallelujah.

So I reach out for her left hand, and I swear to God she is holding her breath. She could pull away, but she doesn't. Her lips part slightly and my

thoughts go somewhere they shouldn't.

"Don't you dare touch me."

"Bit late for that," I say, because her hand is already in mine and her pulse is hammering against my fingers.

Her ring finger is bare, for now. I run my thumb across it and the feel of her skin goes through me like a bullet. Intoxicating. I am so painfully hard right now. If she looks down, this conversation is going to take a very different turn.

I let go even though I don't want to. Because if I don't, I'll do something that gets me slapped, and I deserve a lot of things from this woman but I'd rather the slap came later, when I've earned it properly.

"I'm going to be touching you for a year." I don't step back. She's right there, furious and alive, closer to her than in seven years of watching from a distance. Still, it's not enough. Not even close. "My hand on your back at a hundred dinners. Your arm through mine down the aisle of a church after saying our vows. A packed church—half of those people will be there specifically to watch your every reaction. My aunt Rosaria has an eye like a customs dog. If you jump every time I come near you, she'll have it round three families before the soup."

"Then don't come near me."

"That's the one thing I can't do. It's the entire point of the exercise." I tilt my head. "So we practise. Out here, where nobody's watching or counting, and you can call me every name under the sun. Until you get it right."

"You're really unwell."

"Frequently described that way." A beat. I should leave it. I should absolutely leave it, but I'm not going to. "There's also the wedding night."

"There isn't."

"There is, and there's a bed, and a door, after people have been downstairs drinking champagne and eating delicacies and cake I've paid an obscene amount for. All of them will be thinking about precisely one thing because

that's what a wedding is and leads to, Manon. It's a room full of people agreeing to think about the bride and groom having sex at the end of the party. Consummating the marriage. At least in our world it is."

"You're revolting."

"I'm Sicilian on my mother's side. It's a whole culture." I put my hands back in my pockets because if I don't, I might fucking grab her face and kiss her. "I want you. I'd rather say it out here than have you work it out at the altar. And I don't want it to be arranged, or endured. I want you to want it, which is far more inconvenient for me. You should take some comfort from that."

Inconvenient. That's what I'm calling it. Years of watching another man kiss her and buy her dinner, have his way with her then fall asleep next to her. Years of sitting in a car outside a restaurant while she laughed at something he said, and of knowing exactly which side of the bed she sleeps on while he's on the other side…

I'm calling all of this inconvenient.

She folds her arms and holds on to her elbows. I watch her fingers dig in and want to peel them off one by one, then replace them with mine.

"That will never happen."

"All right."

"I mean it. Never. Not on the wedding night, not in a year. You get the ring, the church, and my word. You do not get whatever you're talking about now."

"We'll see."

She frowns, and I can practically see the steam coming out of her ears. Such passion… "Don't say ‘we'll see’ to me like I'm a child."

"Then don't say never to me like you've met me before and have a clue." I'm grinning. I can't help it. I am standing in the cold with the hardest cock of my adult life and this woman is telling me she'll never sleep with me. Of course I don't believe her. Not because I'm arrogant—I mean, I am arrogant,

that's well documented—but the truth is, her pulse just told me something her mouth didn't, and I believe the pulse.

"Here's what won't happen, so you can sleep tonight. I won't force you. Not once, not by degrees, not with a locked door. That's not me being noble. I just don't want it like that. I've had women who couldn't say no to me because of who I am and what I do, and it's boring, Manon. It's so fucking boring. There's no point to it."

"So what, then?"

"So when it happens—and it will happen—you'll come to me. And you'll say it out loud, in words. I can already imagine it. You're not going to simply give me a look across a dinner table or a teasing smile after you've had too much wine. Nope. There won't even be some bullshit atmosphere where we both pretend it was an accident. I won't have that." I fix her with a pointed look. "I want to hear you say it. Otherwise it doesn't count. I'd just go back to my room and have a very disappointing evening."

"And if I don't ever?"

"Then I'll have a very disappointing year on top of that." I shrug. "But you will."

She shakes her head. "I know I already said this but … you are unbelievably full of yourself."

"Yes. But I'm also right. Deep down you already know this, and that's what's really pissing you off right now."

"There's somebody else," she says.

Charles Bellamy. Six foot four, a hundred and ninety-five pounds, left wing, shoulder injury from 2021, contract through 2027, drives a black Range Rover. I know what cologne he wears. I am familiar with what he orders in restaurants. He proposed to her once already, in his head, on a dock at his mother's lake, and didn't go through with it because the light wasn't right or the sweater wasn't right or some other fucking thing wasn't right. I can't fucking understand what his deal is. Simp.

I have spent four years wanting nothing more than to kill that man yet never going through with it. That restraint is the single most expensive thing I've ever done, more than the house, the business, or every funeral I've ever paid for. Without a doubt, every day he wakes up is a day I've chosen not to end him, and I have done so because she loves him. If I take him from her she will never forgive me, and I need her to forgive me, eventually, for everything else I'm going to do.

"Charles Bellamy," I say, and watch her go rigid at the sound of it in my mouth. "Flew in at eleven-forty with a suitcase. Left your building at seven-ten still carrying it, shoulders down. So I'd say that went badly for him."

"Don't."

I let a beat pass, all mild concern. "I'm being sympathetic. I'm rarely sympathetic. You may want to photograph it."

"You don't get to say his name." She's shaking and it isn't fear but pure, unadulterated anger. "Not to me, not to anyone, anywhere. He is not a part of this."

She's protecting him, of course. She is aware I could end his life with a simple phone call, but the thing she doesn't know—the thing she can never know—is that I've been protecting him too. For years. Because he's hers, and the things that are hers I don't touch.

Until now.

"All right," I say.

And I mean it. I won't say his name. I won't touch him. I won't make a call.

As long as he’s a good boy and walks out of her life. I might allow her a goodbye, if I’m feeling magnanimous.

She believes me. I can see my assent land in her head and settle there, making itself comfortable. Good.

I open the car door, and then she asks, "Wait. When does this end?"

"When does what end?"

"The year. From last Thursday… next July? I want the date, written down, with your lawyer's name under it—"

"Not from Thursday."

She stops. I could practically see her thoughts go back through our exchange in the garden, word by word, the way she'd go back through a chart looking for clues she missed.

"One year," I say, "from the day you say I do."

*Twelve months from the day you say I do, you're free.*

I said it like that, but she heard what she needed to hear. The wedding date is mine. The engagement shall be as long as I want it, despite what her father may want. And the year doesn't start until she's standing in a church saying two words that I have imagined her saying so many times that I could set it to music.

"You set the date," she says.

"I do, yes."

"When's the wedding?"

I stare at her across the roof of the car now as she's farther away. Her arms are folded across her chest. The wind is in her hair and the cranes are her backdrop—at this moment, she is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I have seen her a thousand times before this, but this right here, with her in my presence ... it's devastating.

"I haven't decided," I say at last.

With that, I get in the car and drive away without looking. I want to, but I don't. She'll be standing there for a while, thinking. Mulling what I said. I know how she processes things.

She thinks I've spent tonight deciding whether I want this.

I decided years ago. Tonight was just the first time she was in the room to notice it.

The engagement lasts as long as I decide, and her father thinks he's bought himself a long one. He hasn't. Seven years I've waited. I'm not spending another season watching her from across a table that's finally mine to seat her at.

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# CHAPTER 6

Manon

Two weeks since the shitstorm started, and somehow in that time, Laszlo Novak has managed to organize an engagement party for a hundred and fifty people in a house with a mortuary in the basement. There's a date now. My father bargained for a long engagement so none of this would look rushed. Laszlo agreed, then set the wedding for the thirty-first of October regardless. He didn't ask my father and he didn't ask me. When I brought up the long engagement, he said he'd changed his mind and gave no reason.

A Halloween wedding. Of course it is. The man buries people for a living, and he's marrying me on the one night of the year the whole city dresses up as the dead.

Charles has stopped trying to fix this formidable situation, yet he's still there, even if just in my mind, reminding me of what a fucking mess I've ended up in. He won’t dare ask to meet, of course, but he hasn’t completely disappeared.

He does call me and I pick up his calls sometimes, when I'm able to face it all. It’s happening less and less as he must have accepted things. It hurts, but it’s also a relief. I think, even if Laszlo Novak hadn’t happened, I had to admit we were growing apart in many ways. Perhaps this was for the best. I’ll cling to that because it's all I've got.

So here I am. Standing against a wall in the long room on the first floor with a glass I picked up just to have something to do, being congratulated by strangers. I've been parked here for the better part of ten minutes next to two of Laszlo's men who haven't seemed to notice me yet. The older one is sixtyish with a thick neck and a wedding ring that has his finger in a death grip. The younger one is broad-shouldered. He clearly works his muscles in some kind of way. Pity that his suit is not at all a good fit. They're both drinking Polish vodka on the rocks.

"They poured two days ago," the older one says. "So he's under the garage now."

"Which level?"

"How would I know which level? He's under it."

I don't move or look at them. I keep my eyes fixed on a painting of a horse that has probably been on that wall for a hundred years at least, while I listen to the two men discuss where they left a body with the same tone my colleagues use for conversations about parking and house chores.

They're standing close enough that I can smell them, peat and heat and whatever they had for lunch. Neither of them bothers to lower his voice. Neither of them gives me the least bit of attention. Not a glance, not the little half-second pause I have been watching men perform my entire life when I come into the room.

That's what I can't get past. My father's men did it in the kitchen when I was eight, went quiet as I came in to grab the cereal. They did it at my graduation, standing in a parking lot in their good suits. I've spent a lifetime being the reason a conversation ended. In my family's world, these two would have found something else to discuss. The weather. Football, basketball, or the like. Until two weeks ago, this was true.

I’m engaged to Novak now and apparently, that makes me furniture. This is how Laszlo's people do things, I suppose.

The younger one shifts his weight and clocks me over the older one's shoulder. A particular expression crosses his face. His eyes narrow as he

sizes me up. Then, it seems as if he comes to a conclusion. Something like: she's his, so she's fine.

"Beautiful dress," the older one says warmly, finally turning. His tone comes across like an uncle's as he dotes on his niece. "Congratulations, Doctor."

"Thank you."

"You want another drink? There's a boy going round with a tray."

"I'm fine."

He pats my arm. Then he wanders off into the crowd, perfectly content, and stops by the fireplace to kiss a woman on both cheeks. A minute ago he couldn't remember which level of the garage they'd left the body on. Now he's asking if I want a drink off the tray. I'm still stuck on that, on how easily a conversation can shift from something horrific to mundane statements.

I don't hear him approach. It's more that the air on the back of my neck stops being ordinary air, and by the time I understand why, every muscle in my body has already locked, and I hate that my body knew before I did.

"Tomek," Laszlo says.

Just the name, quiet, and the young one straightens like a kid caught doing something he shouldn't. He nods, picks up his vodka, and is gone across the room without looking back. Laszlo is standing at my shoulder now, watching me.

"What are we talking about?"

I'm suddenly aware of the dress before I answer him. Twenty-two hooks up the back, and I can feel every one of them against my spine. It arrived this week in a plain box with no shop name. Dark green, high at the front, and an hour ago Dolores did the last six hooks for me in a room off the landing, because I couldn't reach them and there was no one else to ask. Afterward she pinched some color into my cheeks the way my grandmother used to, and then she told me, as calmly as if she were remarking on the weather, that he'd called her from a car and described the exact shade of green he

wanted. Not just dark green. A specific one, and he'd made her listen until she had it right.

Actually, it was eleven minutes, she said. He talked for that long. She timed it. He went on and on, creating a vivid picture. Her job was to help him find this dress, and now it was on me, hooks and all.

He repeats the question.

"Concrete," I say.

"Ah."

"Apparently there's a man under a garage near Ludlow’s."

"Really?" He tilts his head, asking it lightly, with just a flicker of interest, like I've mentioned a new restaurant I want to try. He's watching me with those blue eyes that have no business being this distracting.

"That isn’t a denial."

"No," he says, "but it's a very solid answer and I'd like you to note that."

A boy with a tray passes on his left. Laszlo takes two glasses off it without breaking eye contact, and offers me one. I don't take it. I keep my hands where they are, one around the stem of the glass I already have, the other flat against the wall behind me like the wall might need holding up.

He sets his glass down on the little table beside us, dead centre. So precise, but what matters is that my refusal doesn't faze him at all, which annoys me more than if he'd pushed.

"You look extraordinary," he says matter-of-factly.

"You chose it."

"I chose the dress. You're the one wearing it. I'll be taking credit for both."

He takes my hand off the wall before I can stop him. There’s a ring in his other hand, and he slides it onto my finger like he’s done it a hundred times. It’s simple and old-fashioned, nothing like the rock I braced for. It fits perfectly, which is interesting, because I don’t even know my ring size.

“You could have asked,” I say.

“I did. In my garden. You said yes.” He runs his thumb once across the band. “Smile. People are watching.”

He puts his hand on the small of my back and my whole body lights up like a fucking switchboard. I don't pull away. That's the worst part, not that he's touching me, but that I lean into it.

"You realize there's a mortuary underneath us," I say.

"There is. There's also a string quartet on the landing and a full house eating quail hors d'oeuvres and other delicacies, so I'd argue the house is being used to its full capacity."

"Nobody finds it strange but me."

"Nobody finds it strange because it's a house with a business in the basement, like a bakery." He surveys the room. "Also nobody has ever been late to anything I've hosted, and I'd like you to consider why."

"That's revolting."

"That's life." He snickers at his retort.

His hand is still on my back. I can feel every single finger, which is not something I thought was possible through fabric, and I would like my nervous system to calm the fuck down.

"Stop touching me."

"I'm not touching you. This is standing near you. You'll know when I'm touching you."

"That sentence should not have made it out of your mouth."

"And yet here it is, in the world, doing fine."

Across the room a small woman in black is watching me over the top of her glass with her chin tilted up, like a bird sizing up something it's considering eating.

"Don't turn round," Laszlo says.

"I've already turned round."

"I said don't."

"The way you spoke, it sounded like a fire alarm in my head. What did you expect me to do?"

"Aunt Rosaria has her eye on you," he says, close enough now that I can feel his breath near my ear, which is absolutely unnecessary and he knows it. "How long you hold a plate. Whether you put it down. Whether you touch me back. She told my mother when we were still in school that my brother Constantine would never marry, and she's been right for decades. He has never forgiven her."

"Is anyone in this room not related to you?"

"Your entire family." He takes a drink without moving his hand off my back. "I've put them near the door and had them searched for weapons."

"You think my family would start something at an engagement party?"

"No. I think your brother would start something at a christening if somebody looked at him wrong. He’s not here now, so that’s one person I don’t have to worry about. I know you think it’s cruel, but this is what he signed up for and he needs to understand the gravity of his actions. I’ll revisit the terms later on if I must.” I press my lips together, stopping a curse before it escapes. “Still, an engagement party with an open bar is practically an invitation for trouble so better safe than sorry." He leans down. "Again, you look beautiful, by the way. I promised myself I'd only tell you once, but I've run out of willpower."

"Don't."

"Too late. It's out. You can add it to the list of things you're furious about."

My parents showed up earlier than expected with Denis and Février, all dressed in impeccable custom suits. They are all standing here drinking champagne and laughing at something one of the Novak men is saying to them. Every so often I catch my father's face in the half-second before he laughs, when his expression hasn't changed, and there's nothing decipherable in it at all. No clue as to what he's thinking or feeling.

About an hour later, my father raises his glass and the whole room goes quiet. Thirty, forty conversations killed in a split second. The man has a knack for walking into a room full of dangerous men and making every single one of them shut up by lifting his hand. It never stops being terrifying, even when you're his daughter. Especially when you're his daughter.

Which is why this is all the more mind-boggling. That he's fine with whatever's happening with me and Laszlo today. True, I insisted on honoring my agreement, but that’s not the point.

He's put together really well, not sporting the rolled shirtsleeves and open collar he wears when the mask is off. This is the charming Henri Valmont he shows in social circles.

"I have known the Novak family for thirty years," my father says.

That's a polite way of putting it. Other ways of putting it include: two blood feuds, a warehouse fire, a thing that happened in 1997 that nobody in either family is allowed to mention, and my father's cousin who moved to Argentina and has not come back.

Somebody on the stairs laughs, a short, nervous sound, the kind people make at funerals when the priest says something accidentally honest. My father doesn't react. He just waits, glass in the air, until the silence comes back to him on its own.

"I have a daughter who left this family at eighteen and told me she wanted nothing to do with any of it." He pauses. Not for effect, because that's still a wound and he often reminds me of it. This is no exception, of course. He’s got an audience to boot. "She became a doctor. She saves lives. I don't know where she gets it from. Not my side. Certainly not her mother's."

Another random laugh goes round the room. My mother catches my eye, and she looks dead serious.

He turns and finds me, then lifts the glass an inch.

"Manon. *Mon cœur*."

That's all he says. Just my name and the term of endearment he's always used with me, and it is the cruelest thing he has ever done to me in public, because it sounds like love and everybody in this room believes it.

The room erupts with cheering, so many glasses in the air. Denis roars something in French, and somebody makes a whistling sound on the landing. My father crosses the floor. He takes Laszlo's hand in both of his and shakes it, nothing on his face but delight.

That's the performance, although I’m not sure now what’s real and what isn’t. That's what Laszlo bought. My father, smiling, in a great suit, shaking the hand of a man he'd happily bury if the terms were different. But the man doesn’t appear put out at all. He agreed to everything, after all—the only changes requested were more about his reputation than my wellbeing. Now he's standing in the man's house calling me his heart.

I clap and smile, do everything I'm supposed to do while all these guests toast the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

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# CHAPTER 7

Manon

Laszlo appears at my side. I don't know how he materialized here so fast, but his hand is on my back again and my body reacts of its own volition around him, which I refuse to acknowledge.

"Enjoying yourself?" I ask.

"Enormously. You?"

"I'm at my own engagement party, being chained to a man I didn't choose, watching my father shake his hand like they're old friends. I'm having the time of my life."

"That's the spirit."

No sarcasm in his tone, and that has me itching to slap him.

It's a quarter to ten when Marcus Whitlow finds me by the window, and for a moment I'm delighted to see him, then I realize he's had way too much to drink.

He's got a glass in each hand and appears clueless about it. His tie has gone loose. He was my attending for four years, showed emotion when I passed my boards. I think he is the least dangerous man in this building right now.

"Valmont." He hasn't called me that since I was a resident. "Look at you. You're a stunner. Don't tell my wife I said that. She's by the cake."

"You came."

"Of course I came. The whole department came. Barnes is drunk. Barnes is drunk in a funeral home, Manon. I want something catchy like that on my headstone." He hands me one of his glasses. "Now. Before I lose the ability to walk, I need to find the Halsted people and thank them properly, because I made a mess of it in March and I've felt sick about it since. Where have they put them?"

"Who?"

"The Halsted Foundation. The trust."

"I don't know who that is."

He stares at me like I've told him I don't know what blood is.

"Their name is on a plaque outside your office, you ungrateful girl." He laughs and takes a swig of his drink. "Six-thirty in the morning, I get a phone call. Somebody wants to donate a scanner. Three million, no committee, no forms, no six months of begging the board. It was in the building within eleven weeks. Ferris in cardiology still hasn't recovered. It is my whole legacy, and you're telling me you don't know who paid for it."

"Marcus, how long have they been funding us?"

"Oh, years. Six, seven. Long before you."

"How long before me?"

"Before you were anything." He waves it off. "Which reminds me. I'm going to say this because I've had four of these and it's a party, and if you repeat it I'll deny it. Your research post."

"What about my research post?"

"The one you were so worked up about that you made me read your application twice." He leans in and lowers his voice to a level that carries across most of the room. "Between us, there wasn't much of a shortlist."

"There wasn't much of a shortlist," I repeat after him.

"Well, there was a shortlist, we're not savages. But the money came with the post attached, and you were what it was attached to. That's all I'm saying about it, and now I'm going to find Barnes and those blasted Halsted people."

He kisses my cheek.

"I'm very proud of you," he adds. "You did every bit of that yourself."

Then he walks off, and I stand at the window holding a drink I didn't ask for.

Seven years. I was twenty-six seven years ago. I was on nights in a general ward with a lanyard and no idea where the job was leading me. Back then, I had never heard the name Novak said out loud in my life.

I put the glass down.

I give it twenty minutes, because I'm not going to do this in front of the whole party. Twenty minutes of some older woman holding both my forearms and telling me something about her sister's hip. I cannot for the life of me remember her name. Then I'm face to face with one of Laszlo's cousins, who promptly launches into an ecstatic description of a boat. I keep smiling and nodding, even more so when my father comes to speak to me and I can tell he's outside of his comfort zone by now. I will not give him the satisfaction of showing him how betrayed I feel.

It's the longest twenty minutes of my adult life.

At last, I find Laszlo by the door to the back stairs and say, "A word." I don't wait to see if he follows.

He follows down two flights. Of course he follows. I can hear him behind me, unhurried, probably enjoying this, and I want to kill him.

I shut the door and the party disappears. It's just me and him in a cold corridor that smells like formalin and catering crates. Of course I know exactly what's inside the rooms on this floor, so I stand with my back to them because I'd rather face him than think about that.

"The Halsted Foundation is yours."

"Yes," he says.

No hesitation. He doesn't ask what I've heard or who told me.

"Marcus Whitlow thinks I won that post."

"You did win that post."

"Don't you dare say that to me."

"I'm being accurate, which I accept is worse than lying." He leans against the wall like he lives here, which he does. I hate this charade.

"You put money into my hospital." I poke him in the chest with two fingers. His breath catches. Good. Suffer. "A foundation. Scanners, grants, God knows what else."

"The Halsted Foundation, yes. Well, my accountant runs it. He's lovely."

"When?"

"Twenty-nineteen."

My hand is still on his chest. I can feel his heart going and it is not calm. Definitely not the steady, bored, unbothered rhythm of a man who doesn't care. It's fast. He's just better at hiding it.

"I was twenty-six that year."

"I'm aware."

"You didn't know me in twenty-nineteen." I press harder. His eyes go dark and something shifts in his face that makes my thighs tighten. Damn it, why am I attracted to this man? "You'd never seen me. You didn't know my name."

For half a second, nothing. For a fleeting moment, the mask slips and underneath it is something so raw and starving that my skin goes hot from my chest to my throat. Then he smiles.

"Ask me something else."

"No."

"Ask me about the scanner. I’ve never seen such gratitude and awe directed at a piece of medical equipment. The most romantic thing I've ever witnessed, and I was at my own engagement party twenty minutes ago."

"Why my hospital?"

"It was a good investment."

"Bullshit." I keep my voice under the music. "Every hospital in this country is bleeding money. Why mine?"

"It wasn't yours then." He speaks so casually, like it costs nothing. "You were just a young resident finding her way."

"That is not an answer."

"It's the answer you're getting tonight."

"Give me the real one."

"No." His eyes drop to my mouth and stay there a beat, two, and I feel that look land right between my legs, like he's actually touched me. "You're not ready for the real one."

"Don't tell me what I'm ready for."

"I wouldn't dare." A pause. "But your hand is still on my chest."

It is. I don't know when I put it there. And now that he's said it I can feel his heart going under my palm, hard, fast, not the pulse of a man in control of anything.

I don't move my hand. I tell myself it's to prove a point.

"Interesting," he says.

"Shut up."

"Your professional opinion, doctor." His voice has dropped. "My heart rate. Should I be concerned?"

"I said shut up."

"Because it's been doing that since you walked in tonight in that dress, and I've spent all evening thinking about giving a speech while—" He stops. His jaw sets. Whatever the rest of the sentence is, he swallows it. "Forget that."

I take my hand back.

"Forget what?"

"That. It isn't finished." He straightens his cuff, and the easy expression is back on his face like it never left. "It's not going to be."

Then a door bangs above us and two men come down carrying a crate. The corridor isn't wide enough. Laszlo puts his hand on my waist and moves me, one step, his palm flat through the fabric, the heat of it going straight through me, and then my back is against the wall and he's in front of me while the crate goes past close enough to catch his jacket.

The men are gone and he doesn't move. His hand is still on my waist and his thumb is moving in small circles, barely there. I am so wet that I could scream, because this man does not get to do this to me while my father is feet away up some stairs, drinking champagne.

His mouth is close enough that I can feel his breath on my skin. His hand moves down, tracing through the dress between my legs, so lightly. Then he moves it back to my waist and continues to trace lazy circles there with his thumb.

"Step back," I say, and my voice comes out wrong, lower.

"Ask me."

"I just did."

"No. You told me to. That's not the same thing." His thumb is still moving. That tiny circle. "Ask me to stop and I stop. Right now, back to the party, hands off, the whole night. All you have to do is ask."

I open my mouth and nothing comes out.

He waits. And waits. His eyes don't leave mine.

Then he steps back, on his own. Without me asking.

"You said never," he says. "That's why I said we'll see."

The door at the top of the stairs opens, then footsteps one floor down.

Constantine leans in, takes in the two of us standing far too close, and his face does absolutely nothing. Somehow, that's worse than if he'd smirked.

"You'll want to come up and give your speech," he says. “Everyone’s waiting.”

“Tell them to wait some more.”

Constantine shakes his head and leaves while Laszlo brings his face close to mine, his eyes boring into mine, then he moves his attention to my lips for the briefest of moments.

“Guess I’ll make up something to say as we go.”

By the time I get up the stairs I’m out of breath. I'm breathing like I've run up six flights of stairs. My legs are shaking. My underwear is a crime scene. My ovaries have handed in their resignation and joined his side, and every inch of my skin that he touched is still burning like a handprint.

I was with Charles for four years. Four years! And not once, not on the best night, not under the most sensual sheets after the most luscious dinner did my body do what it just did in an uninviting space that smelled like dead people.

I am in so much trouble.

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# CHAPTER 8

Laszlo

There's only so much I can do with this corpse. A man in his late forties. No, I didn't kill him.

I don't kill people. That's not my MO. I make a request and my men take care of the rest. As for me, I prefer working on the dead. Today, I've been working on Mr. Price—that's his name. He needed a lot of painstaking care and patience. He was in a car accident, so the body came to me badly damaged.

His cheeks are still hollow, but it's definitely an improvement. I have added a little artificial skin where the chin was broken, and voilà, Mr. Price is … almost … as good as new. I did what I could, and as it stands at least the face no longer looks like it's been through a meat grinder.

I chuckle to myself. Another joke. Fuck it, I'm on a roll today.

An open casket is out of the question, of course. Thankfully, the family didn't ask. They have common sense.

I wash my hands and leave through the back door. No need to change. I've got dinner with Manon later, so a shower is going to be compulsory the moment this meeting is over. We're discussing territory, and apparently one of Valmont's men will be there. To be true, it took a bit of creative control to get Henri to agree to hand me his daughter.

Fuck, she's thrilled about it. Over the moon.

She sent me one word this morning. *Fine.* With a period after it. A woman who writes discharge summaries at four in the morning can do better than that. I've read it nine times and still don't know if I've been agreed with or sentenced.

Our other main property is in Saddle River, New Jersey, about an hour away, depending on traffic. Beautiful and atmospheric, with enough acreage to keep things private. That’s where I am now. Viewings downstairs, business up here, in a room with thick carpeting, triple-glazed windows that don't open and two padded doors, because my father bought the place off a man who understood that grief needs peace and quiet, ideally contained in a space that doesn't carry sound.

There are six caskets along the far wall with the lids up because this room doubles as the showroom, and Tomek is sitting on the mahogany one.

"Get off that. It's four thousand dollars and there's a grandmother going into it on Saturday."

He gets off it, brushing salt off the lid as he goes. Tomek is twenty-eight, has had a captain's seat for eight months, and I rarely see him without something to eat in his hand. Right now it's *paluszki*, straight from the bag, and there is a fine dusting of it on the casket, on his lapel, and on my floor. I decide, for the sake of the meeting, not to see it.

Rafe is at the window with his back to the room. He's a year older than me and looks better than I do, which he knows and has never once had the grace to pretend otherwise about. Fair hair, pale eyes, his mother's face from Gdańsk and none of her temperament. One charming flaw: his nose was broken twice by me.

Four years ago he came down into the mortuary while I was working, took one look at what my hands were doing to a man's face, and went straight back up the stairs. He's never mentioned it but he hates visiting me while I’m there, which is fine with me as I thrive on the quiet. He's wanted somebody's blood for Nicko since the night it happened, and he's always down for making sure I know what he thinks of this wedding. Yet the man would take a bullet for me any day.

Constantine has claimed the chair by the far door, ankle on his knee.

And in the wingback, the chair that usually holds a widow or another bereaved, sits Février. A tobacco tin lies balanced on his knee, unopened, and his coffee seems untouched.

I am quite sure he’s over ninety. Spotted hands, a cane across his lap, a suit that was expensive when Kennedy was alive. He came over on a boat with Manon's great-grandfather, and the night she told them what she'd agreed to, he said war would be better than giving a Valmont girl to me. I wasn't in the room, but I made it my business to know.

Henri didn't come himself. He didn't send Olivier either, the one he’d send when he wanted terms written down and signed. He sent the oldest man in his house—a shark who would be fine with a war. That man is now sitting here in my house, and he's not even drinking my coffee.

Message received.

"You can smoke in here."

"I know."

"That was an invitation, Février."

"It was very kind."

He doesn't move. This is going to be a joy.

Rafe doesn't sit down. He's had eleven hours to work out how to say this yet struggles to get on with it.

"Somebody's been using our coffins," he blurts out at last.

"Using them how?"

"Packing them. Four flights out since March. Marku's people paid one of ours to open them at the far end."

I let that sink in and scratch my head, because it's a concerning development.

We fly people home to be buried next to husbands, wives or other family. I seal those boxes myself. I put my signature on the paperwork. I have stood in the small room downstairs and told a crying family member that their relative will reach their final resting place intact, as they were flying out.

Since March, I've been lying to them.

"Bring him in."

His name is Wes. He's a broker. He puts the man who needs something in a room with the man who has it, takes six percent of whatever changes hands, and is careful never to be there when it does. He's the one who put Marku's people together with whoever on my payroll has been opening my coffins. They sit him in the chair in the middle of the room and strap his wrists flat to the arms.

"Mr. Novak," he starts before anybody says anything, "I want to be straight with you, completely straight, because I think there's been a misunderstanding about my involvement—"

"Would you like a mint?"

He looks confused. "What?"

"Mint." I hold the tin up. "Dolores buys them for the viewings. People worry about their breath at funerals."

I pull the second chair round and sit down in front of him, knees almost touching his.

"Wes. Look at me. Not at him." I point at Rafe. "At me."

He looks at me.

"You're going to be all right," I say, in the voice I keep for the little room downstairs, the one with the tissues and the water jug. Low, warm, unhurried. "Breathe for me. In through the nose. That's it. Good man."

And he does. In through the nose, out through the mouth, calming down for the man who strapped him to the chair.

"Now. Rafe's going to ask you some things and you're going to answer them, because the other way is very undignified and you strike me as a man who'd hate that."

Rafe has brought my shears up from the prep room, as I've requested. German, forged for opening a chest, and he's chosen them on purpose. I've used them a hundred times on people who could no longer feel pain. That was the whole point of them.

Rafe sets the blade against the little finger, below the second knuckle, and closes his hand.

The bone gives. It's a small sound, softer than you'd think, like a knife going through the joint of a chicken, and it's the softness that turns my stomach. The finger drops onto the arm of the chair and rolls off.

Wes doesn't scream. Not yet. His mouth is open and his eyes have gone enormous while nothing comes out of him at all. I keep my face still and my hands loose on my knees, waiting.

Then he screams, the sound high and thin, not Oscar-winning for sure. The scream goes on, breaks in the middle, and continues until there's no air left in him. With immense effort, he drags a breath in and does it again. The strap creaks. His heels hammer my carpet. Blood runs off the arm of the chair in a steady line and soaks straight in.

The finger now lies near my shoe. Tomek has turned to face the caskets and is studying the silk like there's going to be a test on it.

Between screams, Wes gives us an address in Bushwick.

"Good," I tell him. "That's very good. You're doing well."

Then he pisses himself. I hear it before I smell it—the hiss of it, and then it's coming through the seat of the chair and onto my carpet. Rafe swears and steps back out of the way.

And Wes says sorry, not for the drugs but for the mess. He says it four or five times, sobbing. "Sorry … I'm sorry … Sorry about the carpet." I crouch down, hands on knees, waiting for something meatier from him.

In the end, the ring finger gets us a brother-in-law and a name inside the port authority.

It comes off badly. Rafe has to go at it twice, and on the second cut the hand jerks in the strap and the shears slide and open him across the back of the hand.

Blood comes out in a jet. It hits me across the jaw, under the ear, down the throat, and a long stripe of it soaks into the front of my crisp white shirt. It's warm and coppery.

I don't so much as blink. But Rafe goes still with the shears half-raised, and Tomek stops chewing. Even Wes, mid-scream, seems to understand that the room has just changed and he doesn't know why.

My men do know why though. They've all worked for me long enough to know that the one thing you never do is get me dirty.

There is blood on my collar and I have a table reserved at eight. She is never late, as I've found out in all of the seven years I've kept an eye on her. The spare shirt upstairs is a blue one that sits wrong at the neck. She will notice, won’t she?

I make some mental calculations. It's fifty minutes home through the tunnel, and it's six-twenty now. The shit is drying on my throat and this man is still making that noise—he's been going on a while and doesn't seem like he's going to stop. I can feel the taste in my mouth now.

I stand up.

Rafe steps back fast, shears in hand. "Boss."

Here is my one rule. I don't do it myself. I ask, other men answer, and afterwards I go downstairs and put people back together with these hands. That is the status quo. It has held for twenty years.

I'm four feet from the shears, and I want them in my hand. I want to cross the room, take them off Rafe, and finish Wes myself. I've already worked out that it would take nine seconds. And what I feel, standing there with the plan laid out and another man's blood on my throat, isn't horror. It's something much worse—it's a yearning for blood.

"Laszlo," Constantine says quietly.

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# CHAPTER 9

Laszlo

Before my brother has a chance to speak, sounds drift through the door. Words.

"—but no, you can *move*, thank you—"

Manon comes through it sideways with Daniel behind her, both hands up like a man in surrender. Every house I own is open to her, no locked doors, no schedule—it's my own policy, so I should blame myself that she's here. My attorney said it was madness. But I insisted that it would be the law in my world.

She's in a coat over scrubs with a wad of paper crushed in her fist. Between her and me there's a man strapped to a chair, missing two fingers, screaming. Blood on my carpet, blood on my throat, a pair of open rib shears in Rafe's hand. She doesn't seem to notice any of it. Her eyes find me across the length of the room and she starts shouting before the door has finished closing behind her.

"You bought a hospital!"

Nobody dares to move or breathe.

"It took me four nights to trace it. Shell company inside a shell company, the Caymans, then Delaware, then some trust in Liechtenstein, and a very confused woman in the medical library helping me chase every one of them

down. And they all lead back to you. You own Meridian. The whole network. The four hospitals, the institutes, nine thousand people, including me. You signed for it on the twelfth." The paper hits my chest and drops to the carpet. "We got engaged on the sixth. Six days before you bought the place I work, you psychotic—"

"Manon—"

"No. You don't get to say my name in that tone. Like you care." She stays where she is, by the door. "My father buys customs officials. My father buys judges and police captains and thinks it makes him Napoleon. You bought a hospital because you didn't like my schedule. You're out of your damn mind."

Somewhere to the side, Wes is still sobbing.

"Do you know what you sound like? You sound like a man who ends up being talked about in a documentary, where people will say ‘something was off about him’..."

Her badge is flipped the wrong way on her waistband. There's a coffee ring on her cuff. God knows how long her shift was and she's driven straight here to give me hell because I bought the place where she works. I want to cross the room, kiss her mouth, put my tongue down her throat, and find out exactly what she'd do. I don't move.

"—and put a sheet under him, for God's sake. That carpet's finished. Are you listening to me?"

"Every word."

"Then say something. One thing, without the act."

"I removed the board so nobody on this earth can mess with you without coming through me first."

She lets out a short, frustrated squeak that shoots blood straight to my cock, and then she reaches into her bag. Her face tightens, and I know I'm in trouble.

I have time to move. I could step aside, put a chair between us, grab a laptop and raise it to my face, tell Rafe to grab her before she does whatever she's about to do, but I'm too mesmerized by her to make a move.

A split second later, Manon produces a scalpel. A disposable one, the little kind they keep on every ward. She flicks the sheath off with her thumb, then throws it at me.

She's all the way across the room now, closer. Ten feet, maybe eleven, but the blade goes through my shirt into my left shoulder, just below the collarbone, into the meat, deep enough to stay.

Six weapons come up at once, aimed at her.

“Nobody fucking dare shoot!”

Rafe freezes with the shears half raised, so does Tomek. Two men on the door have their sights on the future mother of my children.

"Down. Rafe. Now."

I don't feel a thing. There's just a hot pull under the collarbone where the scalpel is, and then something warm running down my chest, and the whole arm going heavy and numb from the shoulder down. I've stitched this exact wound in other men. I can tell how deep it's gone in, how far the blade is sitting in the muscle, and I can tell she missed everything that would have killed me. She must have done it on purpose. She was furious enough to put a blade in me, but even then she went nowhere near the artery or the lung. She wanted to hurt me, or scare me, or make a point. She didn't want me dead.

She's filleted me like a steak tenderloin, and my reaction to a blade in the shoulder, apparently, is to get an erection I could hang a coat on. Most men would take a moment to reflect on that. I take a moment to wonder if she'd do it again.

There is something wrong with me. I've known it for years. What just happened confirmed it.

Twenty years in this business. I've been shot at in a parking lot, run off the road, had men come for me with knives, and every single one of them was

paid by someone to be there and do that. Every one of them had to work himself up to it first, stand out in the dark and find the nerve to come at the great Laszlo Novak.

Not one of them did what she just did: face me down with her chin up, zero hesitation, her whole face telling me there's plenty more where that came from.

And God help me, I like it.

"Manon!"

Février is out of the chair. The cane goes down, the tobacco tin hits the carpet and rolls, and ninety-odd years of a man who probably hasn't done a push-up since the Eisenhower administration somehow flies across the room at her.

"*Mais ça va pas la tête?*"

That one I get. Rightly so, he's asking her if she's lost her mind. Fucking hell, I have the same question. This woman is straight up crazy.

Did I say I like it?

Damn.

She doesn't step back. Rather, she turns and gives him her whole face. The audacity. And she answers in a rainfall of French, fast and low, of which I catch one word in five or ten. Something about her father, and *gamine*, which I know means little girl because I've heard Henri use it with her once and have thought about it since. Did she just say she'd bury her father over this?

Maybe I heard wrong but I don't think so. Whatever she says, the old man goes white.

"*Ça va le tuer!*" he says.

He's right. I could very well die from this. She did hit a good spot, my beautiful, beautiful, clever Manon. Almost perfect aim, depending on whether she wanted to kill me or just maim me. As I said, I’m sure it’s the latter.

"*Tant mieux*."

Good, huh. Maybe she really does want me dead. She just admitted it. My cock hurts now. Motherfucker needs to take a back seat. I'd tell it off and take it down a peg or two if we weren't in such good company. If she weren't here, alive and breathing and, well, existing right before my eyes.

She just had this seasoned shark of a man go pale under her gaze.

I want to lay her on the carpet. I want to know what the inside of her mouth tastes like when she's this angry. I want everyone out and the door locked and about four hours.

Make that twenty-four.

A week.

God have mercy on me. I've got a scalpel in my shoulder and my shirt is sticking to my skin all down the left side. This is the best I have ever felt with my clothes on.

Rafe is at my elbow, hand hovering, not daring to touch.

"Boss—"

"You asked me a couple of weeks ago why I'd marry a Valmont." I drop my voice so only he can hear it. "That's why, Rafe. Her. I've wanted her for years, long before tonight, long before any of this. That's the answer to your question."

Then, all the fight drains out of her at once. She goes quiet and deflated, like it's only now catching up with her, what she just did. The blade now hurts like a motherfucker, too. I've never seen her look like this. Not angry any more. Just thrown.

"Oh God." It’s definitely hitting her. "Oh God, oh God—"

And then she's running at me.

"Don't touch it. Nobody touch it—*don't*." She's got my collar open with both hands, and her fingers are freezing. "Laszlo. Look at me. Can you feel my hand?"

"Yes."

"Squeeze. Harder. Again." She isn't looking at my face now, but through my shoulder at something only she can see. "Radial's fine. It's fine. It's in muscle. It's just muscle—"

Manon Valmont has stopped talking to me and started reassuring the person who did it—herself.

"*You.*" She doesn't turn around. "Yes, you, by the door. Downstairs, the prep room, past the fire door, on the left. Bring me the whole suture cart, everything on it, don't tidy it. I know there's one. If there's lidocaine down there, bring that too. *Go.*"

Daniel, who has never taken an order from anybody in this house except from me, goes to do her bidding looking like a scalded cat.

"You," she says to Rafe. "Get that *thing* out of your hand."

Rafe looks at me. I don't say anything, so he puts the shears down.

"Manon."

"Don't talk." Her hands are shaking now against my chest. "I need you to not talk for a minute."

"You've gone very pale."

"I've gone pale?" She looks up and her eyes are enormous and wet and furious, and not one bit of the fury is aimed at me. "I threw a blade at a person. I threw a blade at a person. Do you understand what I am? I'm a doctor. There is a man in that chair with missing fingers and I made it worse—"

"You didn't."

"I'm so sorry."

She whispers it into my chest, so softly I feel it more than hear it. Two minutes ago she wanted to hurt me. Now she's apologizing, small and shaken, with her forehead against my shirt, and something in me just gives way. The scalpel I could stand, but this apology I have no idea what to do

with. My good arm comes up on its own and settles at the back of her head, and I hold her there for a moment.

Seven years I've spent learning her, and never once have I been sorry about a single moment of it, including now. But this woman has just apologized to me and meant it … just like this. I'd let her do it again tomorrow. I'd let her do it every day for the rest of my life if this is what comes after.

"Don't," I tell her.

"I could have hit your neck!"

"Manon." I put my hand over hers where it sits on my shoulder and hold it there. She lets me. "Have you eaten?"

She stops. Blinks.

"What?"

"Have you eaten since this morning?"

"There's a knife in you."

"There's a scalpel in me and it's in muscle, you said so yourself." Her mouth does the thing. The little press. "You've been awake twenty hours, at the very least. Can’t fool me. You’ve forgotten to eat. Now your hands are shaking. I'd like to know whether that's adrenaline or lack of breakfast."

"I hate you."

"Table's at eight."

"You're not going to dinner like this."

"Then you'd better be quick."

Daniel arrives at a run with the trolley. She takes it off him without looking and puts on gloves before the thing stops moving.

"Come now. And you can explain Meridian to me while I do what I must."

"I fully intend to."

She wheels the trolley out ahead of me. Daniel holds the door open, staring, like he can't believe what he's just watched—a woman walking into this house, stabbing me, and start giving orders everyone actually follows.

I pick up my jacket. The shirt's ruined but I don't care about that at all. That's a first.

"Février."

The old man is still standing where he was when she started on him, cane in one hand, gaze fixed on the door she's gone through.

"Tell Henri the ninth and the twenty-second are mine. He keeps the eastern crossings, I stay off the docks, and nobody touches Marku until after the wedding. I'm not burying men in a month when I've got a marquee booked." Getting my arm into the sleeve is not pleasant. "And the caterers want the final number by Friday. Oh, the swans are non-refundable."

He doesn't answer for a moment.

"*Mon Dieu*," he says, to nobody at all. "I have never once seen her do that."

"No," I say. "Neither have I."

Behind me, Wes has started screaming again. I'd almost forgotten him, which tells you what kind of day it's been. I stop at the door.

"Rafe. Not in this room. It's booked at ten." I think about it. I'm bleeding, I've got a scalpel wound and a dinner reservation. Then of course the woman down the hall who’s deciding whether to stitch me or finish the job. All of this and I find I don't have the appetite for the rest of Wes tonight. "Actually, no. This room must be cleaned. Patch his hand and put him in a car. Drive him home to his wife. I’m feeling slightly magnanimous." I grunt. “Also the blue room will do for the booking. Have cleanup come to get this mess sorted. Carpet replaced.”

Wes is crying in relief.

"Back to him. Take him out to the usual place in the morning, once she's had a night with him. Do it clean, so there's a face left for the service. I'll handle the box myself."

Of course Wes starts begging again, but I've had enough of him.

Down the corridor, a drawer opens and slams shut hard enough to rattle.

She's found the lidocaine.

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# CHAPTER 10

Manon

Seven days after I threw a scalpel at my new fiancé, I drive to Charles's building in the late evening after a shift to close that chapter for good. I took a shower and changed at the hospital, then went ahead and informed Laszlo I have to return some items to Charles. Besides, I owe him a proper, final goodbye. Yes, I've technically already done that, but the man keeps calling me and I keep not picking up. It's time to lay the past to rest once and for all.

I texted Laszlo so I didn't have to deal with pushback. *Don't kill him,* I said at the end. *Promise me. Won't be a next time.*

His response came a full five seconds later, at least: *Ok.*

I spent an hour last night putting a box together with gifts Charles has given me. Considering the situation, I don't feel I should keep them. A scarf, a pendant with his initials engraved in the back, custom team memorabilia. All I've got now is a request that sounds like *please go away because this is happening and I need you safe, far from me*. I do not know what else I can do to make him understand that he needs to stop trying to contact me.

He opens the door in a T-shirt with a bag of frozen peas on his shoulder. New injury? Maybe, but it's no longer my business to know.

"You've been ignoring me."

"I've been working. And you weren’t supposed to call."

"Sure." He steps back to let me in. I hand him the box and he puts it on a side table. He can see what’s in it but says nothing.

There's a scar through his eyebrow where the butterfly stitch was, healed crooked, exactly the way I told him it would.

I keep my coat on, because this needs to be brief.

"I want you to let me go."

He puts the peas down in the sink and shakes his head. As the scent of his cologne travels to me, I want to run my hand over his chest, maybe more out of pity than desire though, which shocks me. Damn it, why does this have to be so difficult?

"On your off time go to your mother's in Montreal. You can sit that out." I point to his shoulder. "Nobody would find that strange." My voice is holding up and I'm quite proud of it. "Don't post anything. Don't tell me where you are, and don't tell anyone who might tell me."

"And then?"

"And then I don't know."

This whole thing has been weighing me down for days, and the speech takes barely a minute.

"No," he says.

"Charles—"

"No, Manon." He seems strangely calm. "I'm not sitting at my mother's so you can go and be somebody's wife with a clear conscience. You want me out of your way." He shrugs. "This is not about me being safe. You're asking me to make it easier. I don't want that."

I can't get around it, because he's partly right.

"He will kill you. I'm not being dramatic. That’s just who he is."

"Then he can go ahead."

"Oh, fuck off."

"I've had men try to end my career. I had a guy put his stick through my knee in front of eighteen thousand people and I was back on the ice in March." He comes around the counter. "I don't run from people. I never have."

"This isn't hockey, Charles. This is a man who owns six funeral homes and buries people for a living… in more ways than one. I'm not joking—"

"Stay tonight, then."

I stop.

"You left me three weeks ago," he says. "In your kitchen. When you told me about your father, your brother, and the wedding. You've been gone since then." He isn't angry. I wish he was. "This is just you coming back to tidy up."

And he's right. That's the worst part of the entire evening. There isn't a single word of what he's saying that I can argue with. Also, Laszlo knows I'm here because I told him. The rest is my secret to keep.

I need this for closure. I need this to convince myself I'm not giving up the world.

So I kiss him.

I start this. Me. Not him.

He's careful about it—very predictable. His hand comes up to my jaw, soft, asking.

I take his wrist and put his hand where I want it.

"Manon—"

"Don't talk."

I take the ring off in his bedroom and put it on the nightstand.

This whole act isn't gentle or intimate in any way. I don't want him to be gentle. I don't want to feel anything except release. Every time he slows

down to check on me, I grab his buttocks and urge him to fuck me harder. He's confused, of course, because in four years I've never been like this with him in bed. He's used to a different me, a lighter me. After some hesitation, he follows my lead and fucks me harder, probably deciding that this feels good. I let him think that way, because I'm a coward. And a liar … and I want to get this over with.

He twists my hair in his fist because I put his hand there, and I close my eyes. Then I'm no longer in this room and no longer in his bed.

I'm thinking about Laszlo Novak.

Weeks ago, at the engagement party at his home, with his hand on me and his mouth an inch from my ear. *Ask me to stop and I stop. Right now, back to the party, hands off, the whole night. All you have to do is ask.*

I didn't ask, yet he took his hand away anyway and stepped back, leaving me standing there, wanting.

Wanting more of that touch.

That's what does it. Not Charles or his moves, but thoughts of a man who touched me fleetingly in a place that smelled of dead people.

I turn my face into the pillow when I get there, because I don't trust the right name to come out of my mouth.

Charles finishes deep inside me with his forehead against my neck. He stills, hot and wet and spent, then starts to laugh. Pulling me against his chest, he tells me he loves me.

He means it. He thinks tonight was the answer to all our problems, except it wasn't. I'm still engaged to another man. And I don’t feel anything resembling love.

“This is goodbye,” I say. “Don’t call me again.”

No reply.

I lie in the dark with somebody else's voice going around my head and understand that I've just used a man for my selfish reasons.

He falls asleep at once, like a light going off.

After a while, I get up. I stand in his bathroom with my hand on the tap for a long time and don't turn it on. I dress in the dark. The ring goes back to its place on my finger, but it takes two tries because my hands feel so numb and useless.

I don't leave a note before heading out the door.

Back on the road, I check my mirrors three times before the bridge, then catch myself doing it. Laszlo Novak is making me paranoid.

I wonder if I’m being watched anyway, despite the fact I was candid with Laszlo. The very idea sends a cold shiver down my spine.

That's what I'm thinking about when I turn into my road at four-twenty and see him on my porch steps.

He has a coat on, sitting with his ankles crossed. His car is not here. Nor is Constantine or Daniel. He looks like a man waiting for a bus.

He doesn't look up because he knows it's me, so he slips his hands in his pockets and stares at the road. I stay behind the wheel with my heart pumping, waiting for him to turn his head.

He doesn't.

I get out.

It's thirty feet to my front steps. My knees have gone weak and my hand isn't steady on the car door, and the humiliating part is that it isn't fear. It's that I'm glad he's here. Glad. This late at night, or the early hours of the morning, after my parting fuck with Charles. My body took one look at him on my steps and lit up. I could scream.

He stands when I'm halfway up the drive. Laszlo doesn't come down to meet me. Doesn't say anything, just makes me walk to him.

Close up, he smells of cold air and clean laundry, and, underneath, formalin. Embalming fluid. It's in his hands and it doesn't wash out. I could pick it out of a hundred men in the dark, and somehow I'd know it was him. It feels like a hand slipping between my legs…

Which is a wonderful thing to learn about yourself at—I glance at my watch—twenty past four in the morning, in the street, still wet after a romp under the sheets with somebody else. God, how is it so late?

"Don't," I say.

"I haven't said anything."

"You're about to."

"Hmm, maybe." He tips his head at the door. "But I don't think you want to do this outside."

There's a woman two doors down who leaves for the bakery at four-thirty, and I've lived this long without attracting the wrong kind of attention, so why start now?

"Come inside," I say.

He waits while I get the door open, which takes longer than it should. In the hall he takes his coat off and puts it over my chair, and through the white of his shirt I can see the dressing on his left shoulder, three of my stitches under it.

He fills my kettle and puts it on the stove. I should be disturbed and angry that he knows which cabinet the mugs are in, so I ask, "When did you get a key?"

"March. Do you want to talk about the key, Manon, or shall we do the other thing?"

My coat's still on and I don't take it off, because doing that feels like agreeing to something. His stillness and calm are making me slightly paralyzed.

"Say it," he says.

"Say what?"

"Whatever you were saying to yourself on the way here."

So I tell him. Useless beating around the bush. I have suddenly no doubt he already knows.

"I slept with Charles. One last time, a goodbye."

Laszlo continues to stare at me like a total freak but does not say anything. I see no obvious signs of anger, although he does seem stiff and his jaw twitches a little. No other telling signs, though. Who would be this calm at receiving news that their fiancée had sex with another guy? No matter that our situation is a bit different, it's disturbing. The kettle whistles behind him and he switches it off.

"I know," he says.

"You had someone fo—"

"No." He turns around to face me again. "You didn't wash yourself and I can smell him on you even from here."

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# CHAPTER 11

Manon

He crosses the kitchen and stops close enough that I have to tip my head back. He doesn't touch me. He breathes in, once, slowly, like I'm a fine French wine he's about to taste.

My face goes hot so fast it hurts. I really should have showered. The shame I feel is not normal. It's not like Laszlo and I have a real relationship.

"I know what a body's been doing. It's my job." He steps back. "So don't stand there working out where the camera or anybody I employ was. There wasn't anything or anyone. There didn't need to be."

"Don't patronize me."

"You asked."

He takes a cloth off the rack by my sink. Runs the hot tap over the back of his hand until it's right, wrings it out, folds it in half.

"Take your coat off."

"No." I shake my head.

"Manon, you look like a woman waiting to be seen in the ER. Take the coat off."

I sigh, and I must be out of my mind, because I take the coat off. It's the semi-joke that does it, which is typical of him, and I hate that too.

"Now sit on the counter," he says.

"I can do that myself." Is this lame answer the most I can do? Apparently, because somehow, unbelievably, I just got wetter. “You’re not doing this. Absolutely not.”

"I know you can." He waits, cloth in hand, perfectly patient. "But I absolutely am. Sit on the counter."

I obey him again and it's maddening because … why?

I'd like to think that he made me do this, but that would be kidding myself. He watches me silently while I lift myself onto my granite countertop and follow instructions like a patient asked to open her mouth and say 'aah'.

He steps between my knees before I've finished settling and pushes my skirt up—knees, thighs, all the way, no ceremony in it at all. Then he stops.

I look down at myself. I dressed in a hurry, then sat in the car for a while. My panties are very thin, cream cotton. I'm soaked through. Laszlo sees straight through them, and there is nothing about the state of me that isn't perfectly obvious from where he's standing.

His hand tightens for the merest moment on my thigh, hard enough that I feel each finger. Then he breathes in sharply through his nose, and lets it out slowly. That calm he's projecting … I can see it's all an act now.

"Well," he says. "That's not helping either of us."

"Don't."

"I'm not doing anything." He hooks a finger in the waistband of my panties. "Lift."

I do what he asks and he takes them off leisurely, down one leg and then the other until I'm sitting bare on the cool counter. I put my hand over my mouth because I'm about to scream and I don't want to.

He folds them in half and sets them beside my hip like a man putting down a napkin. Then he crouches, and the first touch of the warm cloth makes my whole body jump.

"Sit still," he says gruffly.

"I hate you."

"You keep saying that, and yet here we are …" He pushes my knee wider with the back of his wrist. "Open."

My thighs are shaking when he starts cleaning me because this is so intimate. More intimate than the sex I just had with Charles, or anything I've ever done with a man. Why is he doing this?

He wipes another man's release off the inside of my thighs the way he'd wash somebody's grandmother before her daughters come in to see her. Slowly. Back to the tap twice for hot water. His free hand is flat and warm on my hipbone, keeping me where he wants me. I have stopped breathing at this point. My face is on fire. I swallow hard. I am beyond mortified, yet I cannot move. I cannot imagine a moment when he’s not touching me like this.

And then he starts talking.

"I've had four years to think about how I'd do it," he says. "You don't spend that much time not killing a man you want dead without working out exactly how you would."

I feel cold sweat gathering on my brow. How could I have been so stupid with Charles tonight? "You're not touching him. This won't happen again. It’s over."

"Wednesday. He skates Wednesday mornings and hasn't missed one since he was nineteen." The cloth runs over my pussy, warm and slow. "He parks in the same space on level two every week, and there's no camera covering that whole area—it broke in February and nobody's fixed it because the company that maintains it belongs to me. So I could take him out of that garage and there'd be no footage of it. No witnesses. Nothing for anyone to find."

"Laszlo—"

"This time there would be no one else." He looks up at me. "That's what you keep not understanding. You think I'd make a phone call and have it done at arm's length. I wouldn't. This one I'd do myself." I know he's looking down at me but I don't return his gaze. This is too much. "My hands are good at this, and I'd take my time. Hours, Manon. Not minutes. I never do this, but there are exceptions. Like this time."

My hand is still over my mouth and I can hear myself breathing through my fingers. My eyes are shut tight but my body does its own thing. I should push him away and run out of my own house.

But his touch…

"I'd tell him who you belong to. I'd want him to say your name, and then I'd make sure he couldn't anymore." The cloth rubs over my clit and I gasp. "Then I'd take him back to Bedford, put him on my table, and do the work myself. I'd make it better than anything I've done for anybody. I'd do the best job. Jaw set, mouth exactly right. He'd look like a man who died in his sleep."

"Please stop talking."

"Open casket, because his mother will want one and she'll get one, and afterwards she'll hold my hand with both of hers at the door and thank me for what I did with his face." He wrings the cloth out. "I'd carry him myself. People find that sort of thing touching."

I've told Charles he'd be made to disappear and never be found. But Laszlo would be mad enough to produce the body and take care of it for burial.

Shit.

And my hips move. "You promised," I gasp.

My hips lift up off the counter, an inch, and back down against his hand, chasing it. He's just walked me through murdering a man I care about and dressing the body for his family, and my hips are asking for more. The sound I make isn't a no. It isn't anywhere close to a no.

I put people back together for a living. I've had my thumb in a nineteen-year-old's thigh holding his femoral shut today. Now my body is betraying me, wanting a man who's kneeling between my legs and telling me he'll spend an afternoon killing somebody I’m supposed to love and then make him beautiful for the funeral.

I'm soaked and want him to put his mouth on me to finish me off. No matter what words are coming out of him, all I can think about is his fingers inside me, his tongue licking me.

The cloth stops moving.

He doesn't look up straight away. His gaze is fixed on the most intimate part of me, and I'm bare in more ways than one. He sees that the cloth came away clean two passes ago yet I'm still wet… He goes very still, and I feel his thumb move once against my clit.

Then he looks up, in my eyes.

He can see right through me. His pupils have gone wide and black and there's color high on his cheekbones. He is staring at me like a man who's just been handed something he's wanted for a lifetime and can't quite believe is his.

"Oh," he says in a whisper. "Oh."

"That's not—"

"Tell me you're not fucking wet because of what I just told you. Tell me and the cloth goes in the sink, then I'll put my coat on and you’ll never hear about tonight again." He waits. He genuinely waits. "Go on."

I keep my mouth shut as I take heavy breaths.

Dropping the cloth, he puts his mouth on the inside of my knee. His hand goes where the cloth was, and he isn't gentle with it now at all. I'm drenched, and my heart is pounding.

"Christ," he says into my thigh. "I've been so careful with you, and this is what does it."

"Shut up."

"I'm not judging you. I'm thrilled." Two fingers now, pushing into me, and I try to stay still and stay quiet and fail at both. I arch off the counter, moaning. He curls them and I lose myself in his touch. The kitchen, the counter, the argument, none of it exists anymore. There's just his hand, and he slows right down, like he has all night and knows exactly what that does to me. The heat builds low and tight and I'm climbing toward it fast, too fast, right up to the edge, and I can hear my own breathing come apart. "I couldn't wait to find out what you're actually like," he says against my ear, "and it turns out I only had to describe a homicide."

Then he stops.

He just takes his hand away, right at the edge, right when one more second would have done it, and the loss of him is so sudden it's almost pain. Everything in me that was climbing drops at once. I hear myself make a sound, high and wrecked and openly begging, and I don't even have it in me to be ashamed of it.

He stands, unhurried, and wipes his fingers on the cloth like he's finished washing a glass.

He pulls my bag over and starts setting things on the granite one at a time. Pens. Throat lozenges. A pair of loupes in a scuffed case. My stethoscope, which he moves aside.

"Everything a woman such as you needs in her bag."

"Give it back."

"I'm not taking anything." He looks at me. "I'm just curious."

He looks for another second, then leaves the bag where it is and walks to the drawer under my kettle. He opens it and takes out the small zipped case that's been in that drawer since I moved in. A manual blood-pressure cuff.

I freeze, realizing what he's just about to do.

I've never told anyone I keep it there. It doesn't live in a bathroom or a bedside table. It rests in a kitchen drawer under my kettle, and Laszlo Novak has just walked to it like he was fetching a spoon.

"How do you know that's there?"

"Manon."

"How do you know?"

He doesn't answer that. He unzips the case, lifts the cuff out, and holds it up by the tube so it hangs between us, the bulb swinging gently at the end. He looks at it, then at me.

"No," I say. My voice is firm, not trembling at all.

"You know exactly what this does."

"Better than you."

"Then you know what a hundred and eighty feels like." He unrolls it. "Lift."

The Velcro pull seems very loud in my kitchen. He fits it high on my left thigh, over the muscle, snug—correctly, which is somehow the filthiest thing that's happened tonight. Then he picks up the bulb.

"Tell me what's safe."

"Fuck off."

"I know what's safe." He squeezes. "I only wanted to see whether you'd tell me."

It tightens in pulls, feeling heavy as it grips my flesh above the knee. All the blood in my body has already gone one way and now I feel it rush between my legs like a slap. Damn it, I want him to slap my pussy. If he does, I'll be done for.

"Look at me," he says against my mouth, and pushes two fingers into me, deep, curling them so my whole body jerks off the counter. My heel catches the cabinet below and I press into it just to have something to brace against. "Look at me while I tell you."

I do as he says, breathing like an asthmatic, so close to the edge.

"He'd be awake for all of it." Squeeze. "I'd let him talk for the first hour, because they always want to. He'd offer me money. Then his family's

money. Then he'd start on you—he'd tell me you were leaving me. And I'd let him get all the way to the end."

"Please—"

"And then I'd tell him about tonight." His mouth is at my ear, his stubble on my jaw, his hand not stopping. "I'd tell him what you smelled like when you came home to me. I'd tell him I had to change that smell. To mine."

I'm gone. I'm right there, my hand in his hair, my back arching—

The valve opens.

That soft hiss, all the air going at once, everything unclenching … and his hand lifts away in the same half-second. A superhuman sound escapes my lips because I want to fucking die. The bastard!

"Ask me to stop," he says, perfectly level.

I don't.

He pumps it up again.

He does it twice more, and each time is worse than the last, because each time he learns another thing about my body and uses it against me. His fingers work me slow and deep while the cuff swells tight around my thigh, and I grab the edge of the counter, shut my eyes and try to swallow the noise, but it escapes me anyway. I know he can see it, and that he knows the exact moment I'm about to climax, the bastard.

That's when he stops. Fingers still, valve open, that soft hiss as the pressure drops out of my leg and takes the orgasm with it, right out of my hands.

The second time, I come up off the counter with a keening moan and fist my hand in his shirt, right over the stitches I put in his shoulder a week ago. I dig my knuckles in. I want him to feel something too. He doesn't even flinch. He just waits, calm as a man asking how I take my coffee, until I've stopped shaking enough for him to start again.

"You could just say it," he murmurs. "One syllable. You say worse to nurses."

"I fucking hate you."

"You've mentioned." Squeeze. "It's becoming a whole thing."

The third time, I'm sobbing, tears running down my cheeks. I am so turned on and so denied that my body doesn't know what else to do. I want to come so badly it's stopped being pleasure and it's pure agony now. He is doing this to me slowly, on purpose, with a piece of my own medical equipment, watching me fall apart.

"Please."

"That's not the word."

"Laszlo—"

"Not that either."

He opens the valve yet another time. The hiss, the drop, the ache of it rushing back into my leg, and his hand lifting away right at the peak, and I really want to kill him. I could genuinely do it, in a more gruesome manner than he can ever imagine. His homicide fantasies would be child’s play.

All night he's told me the same thing. Say stop and he stops, no argument. That's the one word that ends this. And it's not the word climbing up my throat. The word I want to say is please, more, finish it. I'll get on my knees, do anything, but I hate that those are the words, not the other one. I want to slide off this counter and take his hard cock in my mouth just to feel like I did one thing tonight he didn't plan.

I don't speak though. I clamp my teeth down on all of it and stare at the ceiling, because I am not going to be the one who breaks first. Not right now.

He knows. Of course he knows. And he does the worst possible thing about it, which is nothing.

He straightens up slowly, undoes the cuff and rolls it properly, tube tucked in, the way it's meant to be done. Then he puts everything back in my bag, the pens, the throat lozenges, the gloves. The cuff goes back in its drawer.

He zips the bag and sets it beside my hip, ready for my shift at eleven, like he hasn't just left me wrecked and dripping on my own counter.

He washes his hands in my sink, wrists and all, dries them on my dish towel, and hangs it back exactly where it lives.

I'm still on the counter. I don't trust my legs yet and I am not giving him the satisfaction of watching me find that out.

He's hard. Painfully, obviously hard, and he doesn't do one thing to hide it. He sees me clock it, sees me wonder if this cost him anything at all.

"Yes," he says, answering the look. "Obviously. You think this was easy for me."

"You could—" *let me. I could get down on my knees and suck you off.*

"I could." He picks his coat off the chair. "But you haven't said it. Out loud, in words. We agreed on the terms at the engagement party, remember? I'm not going to be the one who cheats."

His words feel like a slap in the face. As the shame hits me, he reaches over, picks my underwear off the counter, and puts them in his coat pocket.

"You're a lunatic."

"And you're the woman who nearly climaxed while I described a homicide, so let's neither of us get grand about it." He puts the coat on, one arm, then carefully, the other. "And Manon. Everything I said about what I'd do to him, it's not just a fantasy."

I can't speak.

"Tonight won't be undone. I'm not asking about it and I'm not going to punish you for it. It happened, it's finished, and we don't speak of it again." He looks at me. "Go to him a second time and I'll kill him myself, exactly the way I said. I won't be sorry. I'll still marry you, and I'll be perfectly kind to you for the rest of your life."

"You said you wouldn't say his name."

"I haven't." Not once, all night. He hasn't. "Say it back to me."

"Get out."

"Say it back to me, Manon, or I'll take the coat off again."

"If I go to him," I say, "you'll kill him."

"Good girl."

At the door, he stops with his hand on the knob, and for one insane moment I think he's going to apologize.

"You're on at eleven," he says. "Eat something, take a shower, sleep till ten. There'll be a car."

Then he's gone, the door clicks closed, and I'm alone. What's worse, what my mind keeps thinking is how many times he told me to my face that all I had to do was say stop, and he'd have simply left.

I never said the word.

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# CHAPTER 12

Laszlo

I am getting married tomorrow, on Halloween, and I am standing in a locked room on the third floor of my house, staring at the boxes that hold the last documented seven years of Manon Valmont's life. I am nothing if not dedicated.

The room used to be a staff bedroom when I bought the house. Now it has no bed, the windows are shuttered, and the heat's been off in here for years. Paper doesn't like warmth and photographs don't like sunlight. My mother thinks I keep the tax records up here. She asked me once so I said, "Tax, Ma."

"Thieves," she replied. "All of them."

That was the end of it. Forty-one years married into this family and she knows exactly which doors to walk past. Besides, she's too busy worrying about my father to worry about my accounts.

I have a bag with me. A canvas one, the sort my men use for things that go into the incinerator downstairs, which is lit at seven every morning.

That was the plan. Tonight, the contents of this room stop existing.

Tomorrow afternoon she moves in, and you can't have your wife sleeping under a room full of stuff that’s all about her.

I have been standing here for twenty minutes and the bag is still empty.

Let me explain what's in these boxes, because I've never had to say it out loud and I'd like to hear how bad it sounds.

Reports, mostly. One a week for seven years, which is three hundred and sixty-odd envelopes, sent by a man I have never met in person and pay through a business I had set up just for this purpose so he doesn't know who he works for. They detail where she went, what time she got there, who she was with, what she bought, things like that. There are photographs too, because I asked for them.

Then there are other things. Her old hospital badge, for instance, which I'm holding. Laminated, one corner chewed soft because she used to run her thumb along it, a compulsive habit. She reported it lost and had to pay a fee for a new one. She even complained about those twenty dollars to a colleague in a stairwell. It's in one of the notebooks I used over the years. Sometimes, I did the sleuthing myself, just so I got to see her.

So she didn't lose that badge. I have it. That's the end of that story, and yes, I might be that far gone.

Seven years ago, my father's car went over the median on the Taconic at eighty miles an hour. They cut him out of it and flew him to New York Presbyterian. Four broken ribs, a punctured lung, a spleen the imaging said was fine but wasn't, and within hours, his blood pressure was tanking.

I did not leave the hospital for two days.

My mother recited her rosary in the ICU waiting room. I told her to go home, that I could handle it, but she wouldn't hear any of it. Constantine and Rafe hovered around me, while I sat in a chair on the surgical floor and understood, for the first time in my life, that there were things in this world my money, or the family's money, couldn't buy.

I could buy the hospital and every man who ran it. It wouldn't have moved the needle, because none of them knew how to stop this train.

I have never been so angry in my life, before or since.

I got up one afternoon to walk it off before I hit something I'd regret. I left the ICU floor, took the fire stairs down two flights, and turned the corner on a landing.

And there she was, a woman sitting on the steps with her shoes off. Green scrubs, hair tied up in a haphazard bun. She had a sandwich halfway out of a plastic wrapper on her lap, half-eaten, and a paper cup of coffee wedged against the wall by her hip. She was chewing slowly, eyes closed, head tipped back against the wall. She was drained. It showed in her face.

She was oblivious to me, to the whole world. Had no idea I existed.

I stared at her like an idiot, a compulsion I couldn't resist. Then her pager went. She swore under her breath, put the sandwich back in the wrapper, jammed her feet into her shoes and went up the stairs past me, without a glance. I remained on the landing for another minute like a man who'd forgotten where he was going.

I went back up to my father's floor with my hands in my pockets, sat down in the same chair, and said nothing. I didn't have a name for what had happened on that landing, and I wasn't going to look for one while my father was still hooked on a monitor.

What happened after was a blur. He came off the monitor in two days, after another emergency operation. By the end of the week, he was awake enough to swear at a nurse, and I stopped a doctor in the corridor to ask how they'd figured it out.

The doctor gave me nothing but generic answers: team effort, constant monitoring. But I didn't buy it. Someone had made a decision that changed everything.

So I asked the nurse who'd been taking care of him. I caught her as she was on her way out the door, after a long shift. Tired, but she stopped when I asked. She'd taken care of us too, brought us sandwiches, refilled our coffee when she noticed we weren't eating.

"Ah, between you and me, it was a resident. Wouldn't let it go, that one," she said with not a little pride in her voice. "She read the chart and saw something was off. She told her attending your father should be opened

back up because they were fighting against time. He refused, but she insisted. She was putting her job on the line if she was wrong. But he gave the go-ahead."

She kept on explaining that when they opened him up, the bleed was in a place the previous scans had shown clean. Small, tucked, easy to miss. He'd have been dead by morning.

The nurse pulled her coat on. "She's going to be a hell of a surgeon," she said before heading out. "If they don't grind her down first."

Never one to waste time, I soon found out who the resident was. Her name was Manon Valmont.

Valmont. Of all the names in this country. God has a sense of humor and it's a fucking cruel one. So this was Henri Valmont's daughter. The man whose name my father would never utter in friendship. Decades of bad blood between our people and theirs, and the woman who'd just pulled him out of it was the enemy.

Any sensible man would have stopped there, perhaps visited the florist close to the hospital and sent a 'thank you' bouquet with a nice card. I'd have gone home and never thought about her again.

Instead I decided I needed to know a bit more about her. A bit turned into a lot, then turned into everything. Every moment of every waking hour. As I went about my life, hers was intertwined with mine.

That's how it starts. You want a surname and an address, which is nothing. Then you're paying a man four thousand a month to keep track of her, and you couldn't say when that became normal.

Every week, when I'd get the report, I'd shut the office door and give it the time it deserved. Then I'd put it in the safe and go down to have dinner with my mother and talk about her hip. At some point, there were so many papers they wouldn't fit in a small safe, so I gave them this room.

There was no night when I sat in the dark and decided to become this. I renewed an arrangement every week until now, and I have no regrets.

Seven boxes now, one for every year. The first year, I learned fast what her job entailed. There's a night in there I'll remember to the day I die. She lost a boy of nineteen on the table at two-ten in the morning.

I was forty feet away from her vehicle with my lights off, because that was the night I'd decided to stop reading about her and go and look at her instead, which I told myself was a one-off.

She cried for a long time, in the all-out way people do when they're completely certain nobody in the world can see them.

I have never wanted anything as much as I wanted to open her car door that night. All I wanted was to walk across the parking garage, get into the passenger seat of her blue Honda CR-V, and say: I'm here. It wasn't your fault. Drive home.

I followed her to her house to make sure she got there, and then I went home myself. Every day after that, restraint became my middle name. It was either that or out myself and end it all, which I wasn't about to do. Not ever.

In the second box, there's a Ukrainian called Petrov.

He put his hand on her in the parking garage. A stranger. He came up behind her while she was getting into her car after her shift and put his right hand where no one had invited it. She drove her elbow back into his face, got into the car, locked it, and sat there shaking with her keys in her fist.

She reported it. Nothing came of it. These things rarely do.

Something came of it.

I had Rafe take his right hand off at the wrist and give it back to him in a bag. He had to learn to write with the left. He lives in Rotterdam now, and I understand he's moved on.

I keep the photographs of that in the same box as the photographs of her. I've never moved them. I'm aware of what that means and I'd rather not discuss it.

And then there are the Sundays.

A window on the second floor of a building in Washington Heights. Charles in a T-shirt at the stove, cooking breakfast. Her on the counter behind him in his shirt, laughing at something he'd said with his back to her.

I stood in the building across the street, watching. Then I did it again, once, twice, ten times and more. Different picture, same couple.

When I was done torturing myself, I got into my car, drove home and slept perfectly well. That's the thing that should frighten people about me. Not the boxes. Not Petrov. The fact that I sleep like a baby, no matter what I see or do.

Seven years I've been the man across the road. Tomorrow, she'll walk up the aisle towards me in front of a church full of people and take my name.

I stare down at the hospital badge, which is still in my hand. I just can't put it in the bag, so I place it back in the box. I put the lid on, and the canvas bag stays exactly where it is, empty, by the door.

Then I lock the room behind me and go downstairs to have my stitches taken out by the woman I've been watching for what feels like a lifetime.

* * *

She arrives at nine on the night before our wedding, because she said ten days and it's been ten days, and Manon doesn't move a plan for a wedding.

"Shirt off," she says, before she's even put her bag down.

"You could take your coat off first. People usually work up to it."

"I've been awake since five and there's a woman in your kitchen making four hundred canapés out of quail. Shirt. Now, Novak."

Getting the arm out of the sleeve takes a while. I make a noise doing it, but I admit I do exaggerate a bit now. For her entertainment.

"You'll live," she says, without looking up from her bag. See? "Sit."

I sit. She turns the desk lamp around onto my shoulder, drags a chair over with her foot and leans in. Her hands are freezing.

"You've kept it dry, and you've also been lifting something you were told not to lift."

"There were chairs."

"You have hundreds of men."

She's the one exaggerating this time, but not by much.

"Not one of them knows where a chair goes."

She takes the dressing off. Her hair's tied up badly and there's the usual red line on her neck from her stethoscope. As always, the smell of hospital soap and apricots.

Snip. She lifts the first stitch out and puts it on a square of gauze balanced on my knee.

"One. You know I could have given you the dissolvable ones if we'd been at the hospital."

"Where's the fun in that? Are you counting so I know, or so you know?"

"So you stop talking." Snip. "Two."

The tent crew is still shouting outside. Inside, there's the small metal sound every few seconds and the desk lamp buzzing. It occurs to me that it’s insane that let a Valmont throw a blade near my throat.

"Three. You'll have a scar."

"Good."

"It's a scar from a scalpel thrown by your fiancée in front of a bunch of your men and one of ours. It'll be the most interesting thing about you."

"The most interesting thing about me is in the basement." I smile. "Or it was, until you threw a scalpel at me."

Her mouth goes tight at one corner, which is what she does instead of laughing when she doesn't want to give me one.

Her thumb rests just under the wound, holding the skin steady. It stays there a few seconds longer than the job requires.

"Four."

Then she sits back and looks past me at the silver-framed photograph that's stood on one side of the desk for six years.

"Is that your father?"

Seven years. All that work, all the effort to keep her from finding out, even though she'd have done so soon enough. Tomorrow, probably, after the wedding. Just not today.

"Yes."

"He looks well."

"He is well."

"Is he coming tomorrow?"

"He is."

"Good," she says, then turns back to my shoulder and takes the fifth one out.

That's all. She doesn't say anything else about him, which means she doesn't remember him at all. A man in a photograph with a decent color on him, coming to a wedding.

She met him gray and half-dead with a tube in his chest, four days after they'd opened him up twice. That man isn't in that photograph. She saw hundreds of patients that year. How could she remember them all? She has no idea she's the reason he's alive, and she never will if I have anything to do with it, because the day she finds that out is the day she'll look at me differently. And I can't have that.

I sit still and let her finish. My pulse is going in my ear like a hammer on a floorboard.

"Keep it out of the sun, which won't be a problem, since you appear to have been raised in a basement." Snip. "Six. There are swans in a pen by the

tennis court."

"There are. They're for the wedding."

"There's a man sitting with them on a lawn chair. He looks like he wants to go home."

"That's Bertrand. He rents out the swans, and he came with them to make sure nothing happens to them tonight. They're insured, so if one of them dies before tomorrow, I lose my deposit and Bertrand loses a great deal more."

She wipes the line down, puts a fresh strip over it and runs her thumb along the edge twice, then she packs her bag without looking at me.

"Eleven tomorrow," she says.

"Eleven."

"Right. I'll see you there."

She's at the door before I'm out of the chair.

"Manon."

She stops. She doesn't turn around the whole way. Just enough.

I have rehearsed entire speeches, working up to this moment, but now I'm standing speechless in my own study holding my shirt in one hand like an idiot.

"Eat something tonight," I say at last.

A look crosses her face that I can't read.

"All right," she says.

She leaves, and it's suddenly cold in the room. I stare at my shirt and throw a curse at my hard-on.

I'm so fucked.

* * *

My mother is the first to come up. She walks in without knocking, in her silver gray dress and Grandma's pearls, and watches me do my shirt buttons from the bottom up.

"You button your shirt the way you dress the bodies," she points out.

I stop with my hand on the third button. I didn't think anyone had ever noticed. It's how I work downstairs. Feet first, then upwards, collar last. I've done it that way since I was nineteen.

"Habit," I say.

"Mmm." She comes closer and doesn't fuss with anything in the room, which for her is a huge effort. "I've been to a great many weddings, Laszlo."

"I know."

"So I know what a groom looks like on the morning of his wedding and you don't look like one. You look like you're up to something." She stops in front of me. "You have managed to fool everyone and you got away with it, but I never thought you'd try it on me."

I could tell her the truth. I could tell her the doctor saved Papa's life, that I've been obsessing over her for seven years, that this wedding isn't what everyone thinks it is. It would be easy. She might be the only person alive I'd trust with it.

"Mama."

"Don't." She lifts a hand, and I notice the bags under her eyes that her makeup doesn't quite cover. "You'll tell me when you're ready like you always do."

She reaches up and does the collar for me, the last button.

"There," she says. "Now you look like a man who's getting married."

Then she walks to the door and stops with her hand on it.

"She's very beautiful, the doctor. But she doesn't look at you like she wants to be here." She doesn't turn around. "Sort that out, before it's all anyone notices."

She closes the door behind her and I exhale. My mother is right, I have to win Manon over.

I finish dressing. Pants, then suspenders. Shoes, laced.

Constantine comes in without knocking too. What is wrong with these people? He puts a glass of water on the windowsill where I'll absolutely knock it over.

"Henri came to me an hour ago. He’s not happy about Julian staying gone. I reminded him that’s what he signed." Constantine sits on the arm of the chair. "Told him he should keep a muzzle on his boy. But…"

"But?"

"But I told him you’re not unreasonable. You can revisit the terms when appropriate. For Manon. Right? " Constantine sits on the arm of the chair. "And he's still going to get up in that church and make a speech."

"I've already read it. He sent it over a week ago so I could approve it." I do the fifth button. "There's a line where he says he always knew she'd find a man who’d look after her."

Constantine doesn't laugh. He looks at the carpet for a while, then leaves.

He takes that in for a long moment. Then he pats the doorframe twice and goes back down.

My father comes up at eight-forty, tired after going up a flight of stairs. He's dressed in a gray suit that makes him look smaller somehow. Or maybe it’s all in my head..

"Your collar's done," he says, and I can tell he wanted to be the one to do it.

"My mother did it," I say, and almost wish she hadn't.

"Good," he says. "I'd like to meet the doctor before. Just for a minute."

Outside, I spot Bertrand talking to a swan like it's a person.

"Not today."

"Laszlo."

"You know she's not here yet. She's at her father's, getting ready, then she'll head to the church. There's not going to be time." I take my jacket off the hanger. "Afterwards. At the house."

He doesn't move for a moment.

"I know who she is," he says. "You know I know."

I don't answer.

"Manon Valmont." He says her name carefully, like it might cut him. "And now she's walking up the aisle to marry my son."

"She doesn't remember you," I say. "You were one of many patients."

He nods. "I figured. She saved my life and has no idea she did. And you're going to marry her and never tell her." He lifts his eyes to me. "Are you going to tell her, Laszlo?"

"No."

I put the jacket on. The shoulder pulls where the stitches came out last night, and I'm weirdly glad to feel it. Cuffs. Watch. The bed is made, the chair is positioned as I like it, the glass of water is two inches from where it should be, so I move it back.

I'm ready too early. It's just nine-fifteen, so I have time to kill. I like that. I imagine she's barely started prettying herself up in her old bedroom at her father's house, her mother fussing over her.

I've imagined today so many times that I should be sick of it. Maybe I wasn't exactly thinking of a Halloween wedding, but I'll take it. It's quite fitting, to be honest.

Rafe appears at the door, which my father hadn't closed. "Boss."

"Say it."

He comes over and speaks softly, close to my ear.

"She's not at her father's. She left a while ago, driving herself, in the blue Honda." He takes a breath. "Parked two streets short of the rink."

"Say it again."

He does, word for word, and he won't look me in the eye while he speaks.

The rink.

The rink where Charles plays and trains. I have a cuff button halfway through its hole, so I finish getting that right. I should have known the moment she left the house, but she’s smart enough to take extra care.

Outside, a swan gets out of the pen. I can hear Bertrand going after it across the grass, and somebody screams with laughter.

"Where's my mother?"

"Yellow room. With your aunt."

"Then use the back stairs," I say, "and bring the car around the drive to the back door."

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# CHAPTER 13

Manon

The dress is hanging on the closet door and I have not once looked directly at it.

It’s early, but I tossed and turned all night and couldn’t sleep. In hours, I'll be standing in a packed church in professional makeup and an updo, promising to give the rest of my life to an undertaker who is also part of a criminal organisation.

Instead, I'm sitting on the edge of my bed, drinking a cup of coffee that’s gone cold.

My mother was expecting me to get married to Charles, but she chose to stay silent when my father told her I'm marrying into a rival family. I'm surprised she never came up to my room to interrogate me about it, since she liked Charles a lot and thought we’d end up together. But my father must have cautioned her.

I was at Laszlo’s house last night, taking his stitches out, and my mind keeps revisiting that. That photograph on his desk of his father—nice-looking man. Something tugged at my mind when I looked at it, but I can’t quite place why. I've been picking at it since to no avail. I admit this happens a lot since I see so many faces at work.

I pick up my phone when it buzzes.

**Unknown:** Watch this. All of it. Then call me

Charles has used four numbers since Sunday and I've already blocked three. I'm about to put the thing face down on the mattress when the second message loads underneath.

A video file. Thirty-one seconds.

The still is a loading bay. Ceiling camera, roller shutter half down, that gray security-camera color where everything on earth looks wet.

I press play because I'm an idiot.

There's no sound, just four men, a stack of pallets, and a flickering strip light. Two of them are holding a third up by the arms. He isn't fighting, his feet are dragging. I've seen enough people in that state to know he's already concussed and won't remember any of what's coming, which I'd hazard a guess should be considered a mercy.

The fourth man comes in from the left.

I gasp when I recognize him. I know that walk very well. He's had it since middle school.

Julien.

My brother picks up a length of scaffolding off the pallets and hits the man, who obviously cannot defend himself. I suck in a breath. Then he goes again and again, four times in the head. After waiting a little, he does it once more after the man has already stopped moving. Then he steps back, wipes his hand down his own jacket, and says something. One of the others laughs. I can hear it in my head.

This happened two years ago, because I recognize the stupid haircut he had for one summer. Mom kept complaining about it.

**Charles:** I'm sorry. Didn't know how else to make you look at it

**Charles:** That video belongs to Novak. His men filmed it. Do you understand what that means? Your father does what he says because of that video. Your brother walks, now you marry him. All because of this

**Charles:** There's a man called Emil who used to work for him. He was pushed out last year and he kept a copy. He wanted forty thousand for it. I paid him sixty because I didn't want him having second thoughts

**Charles:** So I have it now. Come and watch me delete it. Halsted rd, the rink. Side door's open, been here all night

**Charles:** Keep looking at it. I don't know what I'm going to do with it. It's Julien's fault we're not together, isn't it? If he hadn't done this, none of it happens. You and me are still us

**Charles:** Please just come

I'm going to be sick. This is not like him. He must have been drinking.

There's a video of my brother killing a man on his phone, and he says he doesn’t know what he’s going to do with it.

He doesn't have anything except proof of a crime, of course. Nothing that could possibly free me. Novak’s men filmed it. Novak owns the original. Charles has to know this, too. He’s not stupid.

But clearly this is not about setting me free. It’s about what he wants—getting me to go.

It's one of his texts I can't stop reading: *It's Julien's fault we’re not together, isn't it?*

Guess he's finally found someone to hold responsible for losing me, apart from Laszlo Novak, and that’s Julien. No matter how fucked up he is, and how horrible his actions in that video, he’s still my brother. My blood. Exposing this could get my brother jailed for life or worse, killed. The whole family would be affected. In their world, these things are never taken lightly.

Charles is out of his mind. I’d bet my bottom dollar he’s been drinking. In fact, I know he has, because he can’t cope with what’s happening. I never realized how weak he was until this shitshow happened. I’m the one in the ring, putting everything on the line for my family. Now he comes and tries to destroy everything in the blink of an eye. Because really and truly, he doesn’t care about me at all.

I cannot stay here and do nothing, let him do what I think he’s threatening to do.

I have to go, so I can take Julien out of his hands and delete the whole thing. I won’t be manipulated this way. Anger mingles with concern as I try to figure out how to get this to work.

Going to meet Charles would be the one thing Laszlo told me would get him killed. He’s at the rink. Laszlo Novak owns that parking garage. He freaking owns every damn thing … but if I avoid the garage and slip in from the back door, I might just get away with it undetected.

I know the risk but I'm going to do it anyway.

I get to the bathroom and lean over the sink as my heart thumps against my chest like I've run up six flights. Charles genuinely doesn't know what he's holding. He thinks he's taken a gun off a table. He hasn't. He's picked one up.

Then a thought hits me: Should I tell Laszlo? I consider it for a short while. Then I remember him by the car in the dark saying *all right* far too quickly when I asked him to leave Charles alone. Then of course his chilling words in my kitchen… If I tell him, Charles will be dead by tonight.

I stand up. My legs aren't right.

**Me:** 20 minutes. You delete it while I watch.

I want to add, ‘Then you forget about me,’ but I don’t want to stir the beast.

**Charles:** Ok

* * *

I quickly put on jeans, throw on a sweater and coat, then walk down the back stairs, out the side door and across the driveway with the keys in my hand. It will be a while before the stylists arrive, so the plan is I’ll be back by then. It’s not like I’m high maintenance—everybody knows I’m not.

Two of Novak's men happen to be at the top of the driveway in the gray Audi they've been living in for a couple of days. The younger one gets out. He's about twenty-five with a bad haircut. I don't think I've ever heard him talk.

"Miss Valmont."

"I forgot to get my earrings from the hospital locker. I'll be back in an hour."

He doesn't ask which hospital, and he doesn't offer to drive me there, which is good.

"Drive safe, miss."

I pull out in the Honda and catch a man in my mirror at the end of my father's road with a phone already at his ear, watching me go. I put the radio on and tell myself it means nothing. That’s their job.

Here's my plan, and it's a good one. Of course, I don't drive into the garage.

Three days ago Laszlo Novak was coolly describing this garage to me—particularly level two, where Charles normally parks his car. I know it’s different from other floors as there’s one pole that’s painted red not far from the elevators. One of the cameras stopped working in February and has never been fixed—and the company that maintains it belongs to him. He told me exactly what he'd do to Charles Bellamy in that garage, all delivered in such a pleasant voice, and he did it with his hand between my legs…

Yeah, that time he didn't let me finish and I never told him to stop.

So it stands to reason I don't go anywhere near the garage, and that goes for any level. I park on the street two blocks down, and I walk there, going in through the side door by the staff entrance. If I'm careful, I'm in and out. Get the phone, watch the video die, drive home to get ready for my wedding. Of course, there’s no telling he hasn’t saved the video elsewhere, but I’d rather not think about this. I can only do what’s in my control.

The side door is propped open and there's no one at the desk. Nothing’s going on today so that’s not surprising. I walk toward the ice rink and spot

him at the far end under the lights, going round and round in slow loops in a long sleeved T-shirt and jogging pants, hands behind his back.

I go through the gate in the boards and stand on the rubber matting with my arms folded.

He skates over and steps off, gray circles under his eyes, at least a couple of days of stubble. When he says my name I can smell the whiskey on his breath, and it's morning. There's a whiskey bottle on the bench with three inches left in it, and he's not steady on the blades. In my years of knowing him, I've never seen him drunk.

Looking at him, swaying, reeking, proud of himself, the last of whatever I was carrying for this man suddenly whooshes out of me. I came here thinking there'd be grief. But all I manage is a weary sort of contempt, because I am about to do the hardest thing I've ever done to protect my family and this man has the audacity to get drunk on Halloween morning as if he's the only one suffering.

Halloween indeed. Where are the decorations? There should be pumpkins and witches on broomsticks laughing their heads off at the sheer ridiculousness of it all.

"You look like death, Charles."

"You came," he says. Pathetic.

"Give me the phone." The words tumble out of me in a rush, and it's so hard to keep the rage at bay.

"Wait just a minute. What's the rush?"

Is he joking? I can't tell. I should be home getting my face and hair poked at and pulled right about now, then wrangling my body into a wedding dress my mother chose for me.

I give him a minute and he takes way more while he wobbles on his skates and stares at me. It's not the video he's talking about. He mentions a detective he hired, a retired policeman who's been building a file on my family since this shitstorm happened. Charles wants to tell me all about what's in it as if any of this is news to me.

"My father could be creative with his kills. I found that out in my high school years, when he offed a guy with an anchor," I tell him, not giving a fuck anymore. "My aunt told me over cake with ice-cream at a family lunch, and then she asked if I was dating anyone at my school."

His eyes widen just a smidge, but he looks half way to madness already so it’s not all that noticeable. "So you knew."

"Yes."

"For four years." He shakes his head. "I sat next to your father some Sundays and talked to him about sports, the problems with my knee… you never said anything..."

"You never asked me a single thing about myself that you couldn't put on a Christmas card. Don't stand there now and tell me I hid this from you."

He looks at me for a long time.

"You're marrying him today," he says. "In a church. And you've never once told me you don't want to."

"Charles."

"Say it. Say it and I'll delete the video right here while you watch. Then, you'll never hear from me again, as you wish. That's the whole reason I came."

I try to give him what he asks but I can't. I open my mouth and nothing comes out. The silence goes on and on. Then I shake my head and he must take that as confirmation of a ‘no’.

A flash of … relief? … crosses his face. "Right," he says. "Great. Fine." He turns and skates for the gate. "It's in my bag."

I look at my watch. Way past ten. Oh dear. Time’s pressing.

I follow him, because I am not walking out of this building until I've seen those images of my brother killing a man deleted. The locker room smells of old sweat and the chemical deodorizer they spray in the skates. Charles drops onto the bench and starts on his laces, but his hands won't cooperate.

"Charles. The phone."

"I can't walk in these. Give me a second—"

I want to tell him I've already given him more than enough time, but I keep my mouth shut. He gets the left skate off, then he looks up at me with his hair stuck to his forehead. He looks so exhausted now, beyond drunk, washed out. I can't stand here and say I'm not feeling anything—that would be a lie. It's not love, exactly—more like grief. Grief for a version of my life I'm not going to get. Not that I still want it. That's the bad part.

So I cross the distance between us. I take his face in both hands and kiss him. This is my goodbye, the definitive one because I've already done this with him. A quick kiss, then it's over for good. I feel nothing.

For a moment, that's all it is. Then his hand comes up into my hair and closes in a fist around a few strands. No, this is not what I meant…

"Charles—"

He's up off the bench before I understand he's moving, one skate still on, and the wall comes at my back hard enough to knock something off a hook. Now his mouth is at my throat and he's speaking into my skin—*you're mine, you've been mine for four years*—and it sounds so wrong, like a man talking in his sleep. Like the words are the only thing holding him upright. This isn't what it's supposed to be anymore.

I try to pull back but he latches on. "Stop it. Charles. *Stop.*"

I know how to do this: thumb to the eye, the notch, the throat, jaw-strike, knee on crotch. I get the heel of my hand under his jaw and shove as hard as I can. With a grunt, he takes both my wrists and pins them to the wall above my head, holding them with one hand.

My body is not mine anymore.

"Stop. *Stop!* Charles—" I gasp.

The scream is there. I can feel it sitting in my chest with nowhere to go, because there's no breath under it, because two hundred and sixteen pounds

of muscled man is leaning on my sternum. My sweater is coming up and my skin feels raw, exposed.

"Look at my face," I say, my voice sounding alien to me. "Charles. *Look at my face.*"

He isn't looking at my face. He's looking through me, and with eyes that appear flat. Totally blank. And that's the moment the fear and panic go up a few notches, because there is no one home in there to reach. The man is gone. Whatever has taken over is lodged deep within and I might just as well be a stranger. Or more so, a worthless object covered in a meat suit.

He doesn't know my name anymore. He doesn’t know me.

His free hand goes to the front of my jeans and my mind flips.

*No. No. Not this. Not me. Not this.*

I try to break free from his grip and hit him. But … oh my God … I can’t.

*I can’t.*

I’m letting loose in my head, where I can do whatever I want. But here, in my physical body, I am helpless. Rage fills me. Something escapes my mouth, the closest I can make it to an ear-splitting yell. But the building is empty and no one on this earth knows I am in it.

I close my eyes. Some cold part of me, the part that never switches off, starts calculating whether I'm going to survive this.

Then the door makes a rasping sound, and stops with a flat clack against the wall. And the weight is gone off me so completely and so fast that all the air arrives at once and I go down on my side, coughing, holding my chest.

I get up on one elbow with my hair across my face and my sweater rucked under my arms to find Laszlo Novak standing in the middle of that locker room in a white shirt and suspenders, holding my ex up off the floor by a fistful of T-shirt.

He isn't looking at Charles though. He's looking at me. At my mouth. At my wrist. At the coat, and the buttons on the floor, and the marks already

coming up red on my skin. Then I see his face change, slowly, so slowly, and the warmth drains out of it.

Charles gets a hand around Laszlo’s forearm but can't move it so much as an inch. The man’s like solid brick. "Who the fuck—"

"We haven't met," Laszlo says pleasantly. "Name’s Novak. I'm the groom."

Then he smiles at me. That’s the most terrifying thing I have ever seen on a human face.

"Wait in the car for me, would you, sweetheart? I won’t be long." His jaw twitches. “Pity.”

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# CHAPTER 14

Laszlo

I never thought I'd have to kill a man myself.

Before I left the house, I was expecting a wedding to be the only excitement of the day. Then Rafe told me her car had stopped off of Halstead, and I spent the whole drive fuming, wondering why Manon would break the one promise I asked of her, today of all days. One request I'd given her: Get to the church and marry me. Apparently that was too much.

The tracker put her two blocks from the rink, tucked in where she probably thought no one would look. Clever girl. She just has no clue about the tracker in her car.

I come in through the staff entrance, past the empty desk, which I'd bet is what she did. Then I hear it—a scrape, a thud, a scuffle? And muffled moans. No words that I can make out.

My feet are already moving. Ice forms around my chest, around the most acute dread I've ever felt. I follow the sounds to the locker room, and every thought about broken promises dies where I stand.

She's on her feet, backed against a bare wall past a row of lockers, her clothing ripped, her face red and streaked with tears. His hands are on her. On what's mine. He's holding her wrist too tight—there'll be marks on her skin. My blood rings in my ears.

I have him off her and up by the shirt, and the cold fear that drove me in here burns off into pure violence. I want him slashed to pieces and dead. I want his mutilated body in a landfill somewhere. I want to take my time, but I already know I won't get to do that, which makes me madder.

"Laszlo—"

"Wait in the car for me, would you, sweetheart. I won't be long." My face feels so tight, like it’s going to explode. "Pity."

Of course she doesn't move. This woman has never once done what she’s asked in her life, which is part of the reason I'm marrying her.

So I take him with me. Out of the locker room and up the ramp into the garage, because I have a place in mind for this—after all I promised her how it was going to go that night at her house. With this, at least, I can stick to the script. Level two. His weekly space, under the camera that’s out of order. My men will take care of the rest afterward.

She follows us up, because of course she does.

He's only got one skate on, the motherfucker. I don’t know how I manage to hold him—the bloodlust is giving me strength I had no clue I possessed. I’m no scrawny guy but this is a big man and I’m handling him like he’s a puppet. Good thing he’s under the influence. I can smell the alcohol off him. The second I set him down he wobbles like a newborn deer and slips to the ground.

"So you're the fucker forcing Manon to get married," he spits, hauling himself upright against a concrete pillar. He's breathing hard, and now I see the cuts across his face that must be Manon's work. Good girl.

"I see you have no self-respect. Your ex is getting married in hours and you're not even dressed for it." I take a step toward him. Behind me, Manon makes a small, strangled sound. This needs to be quick, for her sake, though she chose to come here and I still don't have the best grip of myself. Later. Along with everything else.

"Listen, man, maybe I went too far, but sh—"

I punch him in the mouth, as hard as I can. His head snaps back and his lip splits against his teeth. It’s only a little satisfying. His blade skids out from under him again and he goes down hard, coughing and spitting a red mess. An incisor skitters across the oil-stained concrete and stops near an empty car spot. I'll retrieve that later and wire it back in for the viewing.

Then he surprises me by getting on his feet pretty fast, and swings at me.He catches me across the jaw and turns my head, and for one white second the concrete tilts. I taste copper. It's a good punch. Honest. Behind me, Manon screams my name.

I roll my jaw. Still hinged. But just in case, I know a guy who does excellent work on mandibles.

"Better," I tell him. "Again."

He obliges. The second one I let hit my ribs, just to confirm what I already know. There's real power in him, but none of it matters, because all of it is half-way balanced on one strip of steel on one foot and a sock in the other. The first is meant for a surface this floor doesn't have. The third punch I catch out of the air by the wrist, and I see his confidence waver a little. He pulls. I don't move. His struggles with his balance and his eyes go from my hand to my face. Whatever he finds there drains the fight out of him faster than the whiskey put it in.

"Wait—" he says.

I break his nose with my forehead. The crunching sound makes me happy, of cartilage folding sideways. Blood gushes down over his mouth and he howls. His feet quit on him entirely, and I catch him by the collar before his knees finish buckling.

Then I go to work.

The first punch caves his cheek. On the second I feel the orbital bone give, that delicate eggshell crack I've only ever felt post-mortem under careful thumbs, and it is so much better like this. His head lolls. He swings again anyway, wild, glancing off my shoulder. Credit to him, the man does not know he's already dead. The fourth punch puts a molar into the back of his throat and he chokes on it, gargling, spraying red with every cough. My

knuckles have split and I can no longer tell whose blood is lacquering my fist. It doesn't matter. It'll all be mine soon enough—every bit of his will to live.

Blood roars through my head and I'm loving this. Inflicting worse pain on the man who hurt Manon. Manon, who is sacred, who is watching me do exactly what I promised her, exactly where I promised it.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear screams. Hers. I should care about that but I don't.

I keep going, taking him apart, his face losing its form with every blow. Cheekbone. Brow. The bridge where his nose used to be. He isn't defending himself anymore. Blood spills across the concrete, finds the slope, crawls toward a drain close by.

After a while, a plot twist: the roaring in my head grows louder, because all that blood is rushing somewhere else. Down. Between my fucking legs.

What is wrong with me? I'm getting aroused by killing a man. That's not ideal. They write textbooks about this shit. It’s some kind of disorder. When I finally stop to breathe, I notice the red spots on my shirt. Parts of the dead are all over me, mostly his face. Twenty years I've spent putting faces back on the dead, and this is the first one I've worn to my own wedding. I can't help it. I'm truly the most hilarious man I know.

"Laszlo! Oh my God, he’s not moving. You have to stop. Please stop," Manon says, her voice cracking. I hear her, she’s been screaming at me for a while, but I can't turn my head. All of me is fixed on the body—or what's left of it.

My vision blurs and the concrete tilts once more as my body rebels. I have never been so hard in my life. My breath comes in short, ragged pants. My cock aches.

I let Charles drop in a heap on the ground. The one skate blade tinkles against the concrete like a small, weak bell. I close my eyes and count. I've never taken a life before with my bare hands. It is exhilarating, release and arousal braided together with no clean seam between them. All right. I

might be a complete psychopath. Who cares, as long as I sleep at night? And I sleep beautifully.

When I open my eyes, I can see clearly again. He's gone, and I'm faintly disappointed it only took me a few minutes. Four years of restraint since she started with him and it's over that fast. A sharp pain in my knuckle makes itself known, and I see that one of Charles' teeth is lodged in it like a trophy I didn't ask for. I pluck it out and pocket it. I can hardly feel my fists.

"Shit, Manon. It's going to take me all day to fix him for the funeral. You'll have to tell his mother she can't have an open casket," I inform my future wife, whose mouth is hanging open and eyes are wide as saucers. Terrified. His face is pulp. The eyes are in there somewhere, and even I would have to consult the photographs to remember his face.

I turn to face Manon fully, and now she's staring at my crotch. Not a bit less terrified.

She doesn't say anything. She doesn't have to. I'm increasingly aware I need to do something about this quickly, or a church full of people is going to be very disappointed. Also, the caterers were extremely clear about the deposit.

I take my phone out with a hand that leaves a red print on the screen, and call Rafe.

"The rink at Halsted. Level two." I keep my eyes on Manon while I speak. "Bring the crew and the van. One body, quite a mess, and a floor with a drain, so it won't be the worst you've done. Also clean up needed in the locker room. Advise our usual contacts. The family gets the local-gang story. Get him moved and I will iron out the fine details later."

Rafe says he's on the way and doesn't ask a single question, which is why I like working with him. I put the phone away.

I walk to her slowly and put my hands on her arms. She's calmer now, not shaking, not shouting, which is good because I don't think I could take a scene right now. Maybe the numbness is a reaction in itself. Or maybe considering what just happened to her, she's got a stronger stomach than I anticipated.

"Manon, darling, don't look. That prick of a hockey player is dead," I tell her, though I'm not sure it's reaching her. “He can’t hurt you anymore. He should not have laid a finger on you that way.”

She takes a half step back, then slaps me. A proper one that nearly takes me off balance. Where did that come from? She's five foot seven and half my size.

"You're sick!" she says, shouting now. "Look at you. I didn't need your help. I could have gotten free of him myself."

"I don't think so, *słoneczko*. He was a giant of a man and armed with half his footwear. That would have been logistically complex, and one skate alone can be a formidable weapon."

“Don't call me things I can't understand." She presses her lips into a thin line and slaps me again.

For fuck's sake. What is wrong with this woman? But the slap only sharpens the arousal, which raises questions about me I intend never to examine. I'm painfully hard, and if she keeps this up I might actually come, which would be embarrassing this side of the wedding night.

“Okay, *ma macabre*.” What a sudden bout of inspiration…

"What did you just call me?"

"*Ma macabre.*"

"Your macabre … what? Seriously. I’m the gruesome, fearsome one. That’s rich. Do you think this is funny?" She swings a third time. I catch her wrist and pull her into me. Our faces are inches apart, and she must be able to feel exactly how ready I am because she goes soft, and her eyes widen again. Not with fear this time.

"Let go of my arm."

"Fine. But don't slap me again," I warn her, not letting go. I want this woman so much I might explode. Her ex lies a few feet away with a face nobody will recognize. Rafe is on the way and neither of us seems to be breathing properly. Her gaze drops to my mouth. I’m sure she didn’t really

want to do that. The air between us crackles. How long do we have before this space becomes a hubbub of activity with the cleanup crew?

Then I slam my mouth into hers, release her wrist, wrap my arms around her, and start devouring her. She tastes better than I have ever imagined, and I have imagined this in forensic detail for years. All I can think is that I want to bury myself inside her and never be exhumed.

She hesitates, but only for a heartbeat, then puts her all into it. I groan against her lips. Yes, I promised her I wouldn't touch her unless she asked, but these are unexpected circumstances, and I'd argue three slaps—and her returning my kiss—constitutes asking.

Yes, she kisses me back, sending the message that she wants this too. I'm panting, ruined already for her mouth is undoing me. My tongue strokes hers as I drown in her scent, in all that is her. Messy and desperate, that's how I feel. The world turns upside down and there's nothing I can do about it. My hands move down her body and find her breast through the torn shirt, her nipple hard through her thin bra.

Goddammit. "Manon," I sigh against her lips as I press my body against hers. She knows what this is doing to me… a few more seconds and I won't be able to stop…

Then she shoves me away. "No. We can't! This is crazy! I don't want any part of this. You *killed* him!"

I smile at her, breathing like I've run for miles, because she's flushed and her pupils are blown. She is so turned on she can barely stand it. She's just struggling to sit with the fact that she couldn't save the poor bastard. Saving people is her whole religion, and I've committed blasphemy on her altar.

"He was assaulting you. He had every intention to take you against your will. What do you think would be a fit punishment for rape?"

She's speechless, only stares at me.

"Tell me. Cat got your tongue?"

"You still didn't have to kill him. I could have reported him!" She looks magnificent, fierce.

“Right. Ruin his career. Then, if not me, your father would have had his balls cut off and put him under cement. Only, his death would have been much, much slower. The way I see it, though I hate that it had to be this way, I did him a mercy.”

She shakes her head but still, she said nothing. She knows I’m right.

Moisture gathers around her eyes, and I can see how shaken she is. This was a man she’d trusted for four years, and he had no qualms about hurting her to get his way. He was a son of a bitch who didn’t deserve the oxygen he breathed.

I reach out and gently wipe away a wayward tear. “He hurt you, Manon. And he was going to do worse.”

She purses her lips, and I can see I’m getting to her. “But…” She lets her voice trail, but then rethinks. “How did you know I was here?”

I’m not about to answer that right now.

I get closer still, in her space. She is mine, whether she thinks so or not. This has been decided long ago. “Stop talking about the bastard, *ma macabre*. He had it coming.” I run my hand through her hair. “I want to take the taste of him away from your mind and body. I want you to forget him and remember only me. I want to fuck you on this floor, and I'd bet anything I own you're already wet for me." It's the truth.

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# CHAPTER 15

Laszlo

When she doesn't pull away, I have no more doubts. "Hold on a sec." I text Rafe and tell him to hold off coming into the garage until I give the go-ahead. No one else is coming. The rink isn't open to the public today, and it's Halloween. No one’s showing up here. It’s just us.

She scoffs and shakes her head, and I can see the overthinking start behind her eyes. Again. I can't allow that. Pulling her back into me, I kiss her neck, her collarbone, then lower, my mouth on breasts I didn't know were so full. I've never seen her in revealing clothing, so some things still surprise me.

"No. Let go of me... Oh, God," she says as I push the bra aside and close my mouth over her nipple. She's sweet, and the sound that tears out of her throat undoes me. I work her jeans open, slide my hand into her underwear, and there it is. Confirmed. She's soaked. Pulling my hand free, I hold it up between us.

"See? Come and taste how much you don't want this." I push my fingers between her lips and she opens for me, so I press deeper until she gags. "That's my girl. You're such a liar, Manon."

"Hmmmfffffshhhh..." She's struggling to read me my rights, no doubt.

I take my fingers out of her mouth.

"Shut up, you're pathet..."

Gripping her face hard just to shut her up, I kiss her more until she's breathless. It takes us a moment, then I have to let go of her to deal with my pants. I shove them down, and fist my hand in her hair.

"Manon, look at me."

She avoids my gaze but I force her to look into my eyes.

"Good girl. Now listen to me. I'm going to fuck you so hard you forget your own name. And when you stand at that altar today, it will be my cum running down your thighs. No one else's. Do you understand me?"

"Fuck you, Laszlo Novak," she spits into my face. God, this woman. She's tougher than steel. Traumatized about an almost-rape? She might be a little, but nothing takes her down. She's perfect for me.

How many years have I wasted? I should have married her years ago. Technically, I've been trying.

"Yeah, fuck me. With the Almighty's blessing, *ma macabre*," I say, and lay her down on the concrete.

She reaches for what's left of her shirt to tear it off and I catch her wrists and put them over her head.

"No. I'll do it."

"We don't have time for—"

"We have exactly as much time as I say we have."

I've undressed a great many people in my life. Few of them were breathing, and none of them were her. So I take my time. The coat first, peeled off one arm then the other, and I fold it and set it aside because I can't help myself. What's left of the shirt next, already torn half off her, so I peel it from her shoulders and drop it, because there's nothing there worth saving. Her bra, one strap already gone, and I unhook the other side instead of tearing it, because I decide what gets ruined and when. Her jeans, worked down her hips and legs and off over her feet. Her socks. Even her socks. She lies there on her back on the concrete in nothing but white lace, soaked through at the

center, and she is watching me with her chin up like she's daring me to comment on the color.

White, for the wedding. I don't comment. I'm in the mood for a different conversation.

I hook my fingers into the lace and draw it down her legs. Slow enough that she makes a noise. Then I put my hands on her knees and spread her open for me. .

"You're sick, Novak."

"I can't deny it."

Charles's blood is still creeping toward the drain, and technically, we're in the way. It may reach us before we're done. I don't care, because I need to taste her. Seven long years of knowing so many details about her and never once this, and that ends now. I lower my head and inhale. The scent of her. I bury my nose in her folds for a moment, then flick my tongue over the swollen nub.

Jesus Christ.

I've imagined this so many times I thought I knew. I didn't know anything.

I lick the whole length of her. She's drenched, her thighs already trembling on either side of my head. I drag my tongue up to her clit and circle it, and her hips come off the concrete and I put my forearm across them and hold her down. She is not going anywhere. She is going to lie here and let me savour her.

"No, Laszlo, no," she whimpers, and her hands are in my hair, pulling me in, not away. I hear the no. Her body says yes. So I work her clit like a man possessed, flat of my tongue and then the point, and slide two fingers inside her and curl them. I feel her clench and her breathing change. I've never heard that sound from her that comes out of her mouth.

She's close.

I stop.

I take my mouth off her and my fingers out of her, then sit back on my heels and look at her, flushed and open on the concrete with her mouth hanging and her eyes wild, and I think this is the finest thing I've ever seen in my life.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking."

"Don't fucking stop."

"I'll stop when I like." I lower my head and lick her once, lazily, and her whole body jerks. "You've had four years of a man who didn't know what he was doing down here. I'm not rushing this."

I run my whole mouth alongside her sex and inhale sharply. Then I start licking her again, slower this time, two fingers moving in her and my tongue on her clit until her heels are skidding against the concrete and her hands are fisted in my hair hard enough to hurt. She's saying my name over and over in a voice I'll be hearing on my deathbed. Right at the top, right when she's there, I take my mouth away and just hold my fingers still inside her.

"Laszlo."

"Yes, *ma macabre*."

"I hate you."

"Tell me what you want."

"I want you to finish."

"Finish what?"

She glares at me down the length of her body, and I've never been so hard in my life, not even with my fists in Charles's face.

"Make me come."

"What was that? I didn't hear you."

A long, furious breath. "Please. Please make me come, you fucking psychopath."

"There she is."

I turn her over.

She gasps as her palms slap the concrete, and I take my jacket and pad it under her knees, because I'm a considerate man and because I want her here for a while. Then I put my hands on her ass and spread her open to take in all of her. Her pussy glistening, swollen from my mouth. The delectable, tight little pucker above it...

"Laszlo, what are you..."

I spit on her. Right there. She goes rigid all over, and I lean in and lick it into her, slow circles of my tongue around her ass while I slide two fingers back into her pussy. She moans, loud, at length.

"Oh my God. Oh my God, you can't..."

"I can." I do it again. She's shaking. Her forehead drops to the concrete. "You've got a beautiful ass, Manon. I've thought about it every single day for seven years, and now I've got my tongue in it and you're dripping down my hand, so I'd say we're both having a good day."

I work her like that until she's pushing back against my face, and then I bring my thumb up, wet with her juices, and press it against her ass. She whines and I push it in, just the tip, just enough, while my mouth goes back down to her clit from behind.

"No. No, no, no..."

"Your hips say yes." I fuck her with my fingers and my thumb together, my tongue on her clit, and she's grinding back onto all of it. I take her right up to the edge one more time, until she's sobbing into the crook of her arm, then I stop.

She actually screams. Not with pleasure but rage.

"I am going to kill you. I am going to kill you with my own hands, Laszlo Novak. I swear to God..."

"Are you on birth control, *ma macabre*?" I ask.

I know the answer. I could name the pharmacy and the refill schedule. As much as I'd love to put a baby in her, that's her decision to make first. I have principles. They're just arranged unusually.

"Yes. Yes, I'm on the fucking pill. Will you..."

I turn her onto her back again. I want to see her face for this. I've waited seven years to be inside her, and I am not going to spend the first time looking at the back of her head.

I slide up her body and kiss her, long and deep, letting her taste herself on my mouth. She bites my lips and I kiss her harder. I expected that.Then I fist her hair and hold her head still to hold her gaze.

"Eyes on me, *sloneczko*, when I slide my cock into your greedy pussy."

I push into her. "It means my darling, my sweetheart, you know. My sunshine in a dark world."

Inch by inch I go, because she's tight and she's taking me like she was measured for it. I want to feel every part of it and I want her to feel it too. Her mouth opens on a sigh. Her eyes go wide and then unfocused, and her nails dig into my shoulders. I keep going until I'm buried in her to the hilt and we both stop breathing.

"There," I say. Barely a voice. "There you are."

"Move." Her hips shift under me. "Move, please, Laszlo, move."

I move.

I fuck her slowly at first, long strokes, all the way out and all the way back in, looking directly into her eyes while I do it. She's been on the edge four times and she's trembling under me, so it takes almost nothing. A dozen strokes and I angle my hips, grind against her clit, and she comes with a scream that bounces off every concrete wall on this level, her pussy gripping me so hard my vision goes white at the edges, her whole body arching up off the floor into mine.

I slow down and let her ride her climax. I watch every second of it. Then I kiss her while she's still shaking and pull out of her. She makes a wounded noise that etches into my brain.

"On your knees, *ma macabre*. I'm not done with you."

She turns over on her own this time. Angrily, but she does it.

"Good girl." We're both somehow stained in blood now as I realized we moved over the floor a little, and that's fine. She whimpers at my words, and although my knees are giving me hell on the concrete, I don't care. This is how I want it. This is how she needs it. Gripping her hips, I drive back into her.

Manon screams and I groan.This feels different from this angle, deeper and much more intimate. Her ass in my hands, her back arching, her hair a mess on the floor.

"I don't want this, Novak," she moans, while pushing back to meet my next thrust.

"Yeah? Tell me again how much you don't want this." I fist her hair and pull her head up so she has to say it to the wall. "Tell me while you're pushing back on my cock. I want to hear it."

"I don't..." I slam into her. "I don't..." Again.

"Fuck. Fuck, Laszlo."

"That's what I thought."

She's a big fat liar, of course, so I fuck her hard, every stroke reaching into her very soul. Into mine. I drive into her like Satan himself is chasing me, but that beast already claimed my soul years ago, and I'd give it all up again for this. She's slick and tight and mine, and I'm going to come embarrassingly fast. Her cunt is milking me too well for me to care about my dignity.

I let go of her hair and bring my hand down hard on her ass. She cries out and clenches around me so tight, I nearly lose it.

"You liked that."

"No."

I do it again. Her pussy tells me the truth even when her mouth won't.

"Look at you. Look where you are. On your hands and knees in a parking garage with your ex's blood under your fingernails, coming on my cock like a good little wife." I reach under her and find her clit, slick and swollen, and rub it in time with my thrusts. "You're going to walk down that aisle today with bruises on your hips and my cum inside you. Every man in that church is going to look at you and not one of them will know. Only me. Only ever me."

"Fuck you. Oh, God, I'm going to come again!" she shouts, so I fist her hair again and pull harder and keep going. The blood is splattered on her thighs, my knees, my hands, and I'm long past caring. I've never once been lost in my life, and I'm lost in this woman now. She comes, gripping me tight, screaming into the ether, and I keep moving through it, greedy for every second of it.

My vision blurs, and seconds later I spill into my future wife, drilling into her until there's nothing left in me to give.

Then I pull out and go down onto the concrete with a wet thud, pulling her to me, off her knees. I see stars, trying to breathe while the earth spins around me. For a long while there's nothing but the sound of us, and Manon doesn't move.

Then she twists around. Bruised, bloodied, and wearing an expression that is absolutely priceless. Satisfied, at the very least. My cock stirs once more. She's lying beside me in the blood like it's a marriage bed, and I glance down at myself. I'm a mess with a semi-hardon. Worst of all, some of my cum, mixed with blood, is smeared across my cock. That sight is going to give me nightmares for the rest of my life, and I don't have nightmares. I give them.

Manon follows my gaze, and her eyes widen. Then, before I understand what I'm watching, her hand moves. Her fingers touch the blood on my skin, barely there, then go to her mouth before she seems to know she's done it. A taste. Her eyes close for half a second. Then she catches up with

herself, and I see it hit her. She yanks the hand back and scrubs it down her side. "I didn't…" A beat. "I don't know why I did that."

She'll tell herself it didn't happen, and by the time we reach the church she'll believe it. I'll let her. My woman is a freak underneath the surface and she doesn't know it yet. All those years I watched her live her neat, put-together life, and I never once guessed.

Right. I might be slightly unhinged. This woman though is fucking terrifying.

There's a church full of people waiting for us and here we are, celebrating death instead.

Guess they can wait until we're damn good and ready. After all, we're getting married on Halloween. Some games are in order...

*Ma Macabre* needs some beauty rest now.

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# CHAPTER 16

Manon

"I know that everyone is waiting in the church, Constantine, but something came up, so we're going to be late. An hour late. Rafe’s going to be busy when he gets here, too. There was a situation. Will fill you in later," Laszlo says into the phone, staring down at his filthy shirt with open disgust as though the blood stains are the most inconvenient part of this mess. I've wrapped my coat around myself but I'm shaking anyway. "Just stall them."

Laszlo’s younger brother says something that has Laszlo rolling his eyes.

"Then remind the priest how much money I give his church and that he doesn't get to cancel. I’ll pay for the renovations of the parish east wing, if necessary," he growls, and my insides clench because there is something deeply wrong with this man's voice. It does things to me it has no business doing. It's like he gives my pussy a direct order and the traitorous organ only asks how loud. I can still feel him between my thighs, sticky and uncomfortable, while Constantine speaks on speakerphone, too fast and at low volume for me to keep up. He sounds stressed. "I don't care that the priest has another wedding scheduled. Give the bride and groom a suitcase full of money, and no, they cannot get married before us. We're on the way."

That was the best sex of my life. *No, Manon, what on earth are you even saying?* Except I can't deny it, because my legs are still trembling and Laszlo Novak's dick is enormous. I genuinely don't know how he was able to fit inside me.

Ah, also, he can eat pussy like no one’s business. Only he didn’t let me come. I feel the frown on my face, then remember he totally made up for that after.

"I'm hanging up now, Constantine. Just tell them there was traffic," he adds, and ends the call. I drag a hand down my face and inhale the smell of blood, sweat and sex. God. I can't believe I had sex with Laszlo Novak. *Near a man’s dead body!* I'm a doctor, a surgeon, I’m supposed to be saving lives, and I got turned on while my fiancé was killing my ex-boyfriend.

Okay, let’s back up: I got turned on by my fiancé killing my *rapist*. Charles—the man who was supposed to love me, had the audacity to *assault* me like I was a piece of meat. Trash. He hurt me, and he knew what he was doing. Didn’t matter that he was drunk. He knew. And when I begged him to stop, he kept going. He’d have finished what he started, if Laszlo hadn’t shown up at the right time.

Still, this entire business is sick, and I think I need a therapist. Possibly several, working in shifts.

"Are you all right, *ma macabre*?" His voice sounds far away, but it pulls me out of my thoughts. I glance over at him, and even roughed up with blood stains all over, he's handsome, which feels like a personal insult from God. Why am I attracted to a complete psychopath? This is not healthy.

"I told you not to call me that, and for your information, I'm perfectly fine," I snap.

“You told me not to call you sweetheart,” he counters.

“Well, don’t call me anything!” I want to punch the wall. My hands are sticky and gross. I should be used to dirt and blood, except it's Charles's blood, and I have no idea how I'm ever going to look his mother in the face. She never liked me and I only ever saw her once a year, so maybe I can just avoid her.

"The nickname stays. But Constantine is right to panic. Our guests are ready to walk," he tells me as he pulls out of the car park. “We’ll get your car later. We need to get cleaned up and ready first. I had Constantine bring

your dress and a couple of stylists at my house. I'll slip into a suit, too. Or maybe a tux. Weddings are nicer when the groom wears a tux."

This man is impossible. "What about Charles?"

"What about him?"

"We can't just leave him there. Someone might call the police!"

"No one is calling the police, Manon, because Rafe will be there shortly with my crew to clean the scene." He says it the way one would say, *I'll put the bins out*. "Oh, you can wear the underwear I got you for tonight. Might as well be ready."

We don't speak for the rest of the drive. It's either that or I throw a hissy fit because this man is making me want to kill more people, starting with him.

We're going to be more than an hour late, but most of the guests know exactly who Laszlo Novak is, and I have a feeling he'd start shooting people in the head if anyone tried to walk out of that church. Even though he said he never killed anyone, he's just proved that claim wrong. At this point, nothing at all would surprise me about the man.

From now on, life is a blur. We arrive at Laszlo's house and a group of women sweep me upstairs, strip me out of my ruined clothes and order me into the shower with the brisk efficiency of theater nurses. Somehow, he's had everything moved to a guest bedroom here—my stylist, my dress, everything. When and how did he manage that? Is he also a sorcerer, on top of a murderer and stalker?

Through it all, these women never comment about my appearance or ask any questions. I have bruises everywhere, and I insist on patching myself up alone, because the last thing I need is a stranger noticing the imprint of Laszlo Novak's fingers on my hips. Never mind the blood...

In record time, I'm alone in a limo driven by Rémy, heading to the church, wearing a wedding dress and Charles' and Laszlo's marks on my skin, which I'm fairly sure is not what the magazines mean by *something borrowed*. My father will meet me there—Laszlo arranged everything. He even managed to stay away and not see me in my dress.

Ah, the dress. The dress fits perfectly, which should disturb me. It can’t be this easy. I can’t just act like nothing’s happened.

I give myself the once over in the car, when I’m finally able to breathe a little. The women zipped me into it and I assumed dresses did this, that couture was magic, that this was what money bought. But I never had a fitting. Nobody ever measured me. This dress was made for me, the waist sitting exactly right, the length ending exactly where my ankles begin, and when I move, nothing pulls. Even my scrubs don't fit me this well, and I ordered those in my own size.

The limo stops in front of St. Augustine's and Rémy has my door open before I can blink twice. His eyes go red the way they did at my graduation. "She's here," he says into his collar, and at the top of the steps Denis sees me and makes the sign of the cross, which I intend to mock him for until one of us dies.

My father is standing at the foot of the steps, looking dashing with his hands at his sides.

He doesn't speak until I'm directly in front of him.

"Are you all right, *mon cœur*?" he asks, and his eyes go over me once, head to toe, landing on my hands. I scrubbed them three times in Laszlo's shower. There is nothing on them, nothing under my nails, but there are a few scratches, and my father stares at them for longer than comfortable.

"I'm fine. There was traffic."

"Traffic," he says.

"Yes," I agree.

He takes me by the chin and turns my face to the light. Whatever he finds there he keeps to himself. Then he kisses my forehead, one hand heavy on my shoulder, and offers me his arm.

"You look like your mother did on our wedding day," he says, and we go up the steps together.

The doors open and hundreds of heads turn at once. The organ starts up on cue, and the smells of incense and lilies hit me at once. Then I look down the aisle and every other thought leaves my head.

Laszlo Novak stands at the altar in a black suit—guess he decided against the tux, which is a tad disappointing—freshly showered, immaculate, not a hair out of place, looking as though he has spent the afternoon at leisure and not beating a man to death with his bare hands. We start walking toward him and his expression softens as I approach. The pull in my stomach as we get closer is not simply lust. I'd rather not figure it out or I'll put myself in a state of panic.

The priest is pale and looks worn out. I wonder how much Laszlo paid the other couple to postpone their wedding. I should find out. If I have to be sold for my brother's life, I'd like to know the going rate for other people.

Constantine stands beside his brother in the best man's place. My father puts my hand into Laszlo's, and the two of them look at each other for exactly as long as courtesy requires, then my father steps back into the front pew beside my mother.

"You're late," Laszlo murmurs.

"You made me late."

"I did," he agrees pleasantly, closing his hand around mine. "Worth it."

The priest clears his throat and begins. As his words wash over me, I can still feel the man beside me between my legs, even though I know it's just in my head. I did take a good shower when I got to his house. I swallow hard and lower my head. This has to be exactly what he wanted, for me to stand at his altar in his church thinking of what just happened between us. Me in my perfect dress holding a bouquet of ranunculus, and it takes me until the second reading to understand what's bothering me about it.

Ranunculus. Not roses, not lilies or peonies or whatever brides are supposed to carry. Ranunculus, which I loved as a girl because my grandmother grew them in her garden—one piece of information I have never once mentioned to Laszlo Novak, because when would I have? We've known each other for

a few weeks and most of our conversations have been arguments, threats, or foreplay, and sometimes all three at once.

A good florist then? A lucky guess?

I don't remember most of what the priest says. I remember Laszlo’s vows, though, or one part of them, because people laughed at something he said before he started, and I nearly did too before my brain caught up. Catholics don’t make up vows, either. It’s against tradition. I wonder how much he paid or threatened to get the priest to consent.

"I promise to love you in sickness and in health," he says, his thumb moving slowly over my knuckles, "although we both know you'll insist on handling the sickness part yourself, badly, while telling everyone you're perfectly fine, the way you did with the ribs you cracked two winters ago and taped at your house because you didn't want to sit in the hospital waiting room." Oh yeah, he broke tradition. The great Laszlo Novak gets away with anything.

Laughter, warm and easy, all through the church. What a charming groom. How well he knows her.

I cracked two ribs two winters ago. I taped them at my kitchen table. I never told anyone about it because I was embarrassed I'd slipped on my own steps. I wore loose scrubs for six weeks and lied to my colleagues about a pulled muscle.

I look up at Laszlo, and he holds my gaze. The moment passes because the priest is speaking again, and people are watching. What am I going to do anyway? Stop my own wedding to ask my groom how he knows about that incident?

The ring slides onto my finger like it grew around it.

"You may kiss the bride," the priest says, sounding genuinely relieved. Laszlo takes my face in both hands and kisses me slowly, thoroughly, indecently, in front of the priest and God, until my knees go weak and applause breaks over us. Once more, somewhere in my chest something twists that isn't quite hatred, which is the part I find disturbing.

"Mrs. Novak," he says against my mouth.

"Don't sound so pleased with yourself."

"I'm the most pleased I've ever been," he says, "and I once acquired three crematoriums in one afternoon."

* * *

The reception is back at his house, which I suppose is now my house, and I need a drink before I think about that too hard. I hadn’t noticed anything when they spirited me upstairs to get fixed up. I wonder how long they took to prepare everything, and I’m amazed that when I came to change for the ceremony, I didn’t notice any of this. There are ice sculptures and a string quartet and waiters with expensive champagne. Tasteful Halloween decorations are scattered on the lawn, and Laszlo would say all is as it should be. I shake hands with a judge, a couple of city councilors, and a man I'm fairly sure I've seen on the news being escorted out of a courtroom, among others.

Julien hugs me too hard near the cake and whispers that he's sorry into my hair, and I pat his back and tell him it's fine, because what else am I going to say to him at my own wedding? By some miracle, Laszlo consented to let him attend the wedding and reception, as long as he behaved.

I find my mother by the windows, away from the music, and she isn't watching the party. She's watching Laszlo's father across the room. She holds her champagne flute so tight, I’m afraid it might snap.

I've never met Kazik Novak in person. He seems to be a charming old man, silver-haired, easy with everyone, and right now he's holding court by the bar with a drink in his hand and a circle of guests around him.

"*Maman*." I touch her arm and she startles. "You all right?"

"Of course." The smile arrives a beat late. "Weddings can be a little overwhelming." Her glass is full, though. "His father. Have you spent much time with him?"

"Not really," I say evasively. I’ve only seen a picture, which would have been strange under normal circumstances.

"Yes. He—" She stops. "He seems … well-liked."

I look at her face, but cannot make anything out. I think she's just overwhelmed. It's all happened so fast, and it's been an exhausting time since Papa sat her down and told her who I'm marrying and why. I really don't want to get into it right now with this crowd around us.

I give her a hug and mingle a little with the guests. It’s expected of me, after all. Later, I see the two of them by the cake, Kazik and my mother, both very polite, and he holds her hand in both of his a beat too long. Something tugs at me again, the same something as the photograph on Laszlo's desk, and I can't place either one.

Then, Aunt Sylvie starts distracting me with her comments about the garden and flowers, and I’m sucked into a whirlwind of relatives on both sides who want to get a piece of me before the end of the reception.

Meanwhile, I spot Laszlo effortlessly working the room like this is genuinely fun for him, and the horrible thing is that he's good at it. He's funny. He's charming. At one point I hear him tell somebody that ours was love at first sight, with a straight face, mind you, and the other guy had no reason to question him.

The evening wears on and a man comes in through the side door, still in his coat, and Laszlo crosses the room to him. They grip hands, and the man throws his head back and laughs at something Laszlo says. Then Laszlo brings him over with a hand on his shoulder, and I see the collar. A priest. Except I'm still working out why a priest has ink across the back of his hand and more of it past the collar on his neck. He definitely doesn't fit the description.

"My brother," Laszlo says. "Kasper. He flew up from Philadelphia to disapprove of me in person."

I vaguely remember Laszlo mentioning a brother and a sister who lives in Italy, but he never said the man is a priest. That, or I didn’t pay much attention.

"I came for the cake." He has Laszlo's eyes, but where Laszlo would charm you, this one clearly can't be bothered. "So. You're Manon."

"Depends who's asking."

"I already know who you are. It's all anyone's said to me since I landed."

He shakes my hand. His grip is careful. I can see his knuckles are scarred, as though he’s been in more than one fight. Perhaps he’s killed men for his brother, for his family. Which is absurd to think of a man of the cloth.

"Congratulations," he says, and I can't tell if he means it.

Then Laszlo steers him toward the bar. The two of them look relaxed together, easy. Although I’m dead curious to know more about Kasper, I let them go to spend time with each other. It's past midnight when I finally slip away from the noise, up the wide staircase, down a corridor, looking for the bedroom. I open the door and stop as a thought hits me.

This is my life now.

And this is my room, for real.

My books are on the shelves, transferred from my house and arranged in the exact order I keep them, which is not alphabetical or by color but by a private logic I came up with: medicine on the bottom shelf, fiction above it, including an obscene amount of mystery and horror, poetry sideways on top because I don’t have much of that. My grandmother's blanket is folded across the foot of the bed, the fold facing the window, the way I do it. My perfumes are on the dresser in their little crescent shaped tray. My hideous, chipped hospital mug that says WORLD'S OKAYEST DOCTOR is sitting beside an electric kettle on the dresser. I drink chamomile tea late at night when I can't sleep.

There are still a few boxes stacked by the wall, half unpacked. Somebody has moved all my belongings while I was standing in a church, and they’ve arranged everything the way I would have.

Footsteps sound in the corridor, unhurried. I don't have to check.

"There you are." Laszlo leans in the doorway, jacket gone, shirtsleeves rolled, holding two glasses of champagne like a civilized person and not a man who beat another man's face beyond recognition hours ago. "You

disappeared. My aunt was asking after you. I think she wants an apology because you haven’t sought her out."

"You moved my things."

"I had your things brought here, yes. You live here now." He hands me a glass, glances around the room, and nods with something like satisfaction. He didn’t mention I’d have my own room and not share his, which I’m grateful for, at least. "They did well. I told them the books were important."

"The books are in my order."

"I know," he says. "I told them."

I stare at him. He sips his champagne.

"Laszlo. How do you know what order I keep my books in?"

"Poetry sideways on top," he says, smiling, and I want to bash his head against the windowpane for moving my stuff without my consent.

"How many times were you in my home?"

"Manon—"

He isn’t going to get out of this. "How many times, Laszlo?"

He sips his champagne. His sleeves are rolled to the elbow and I can see the veins in his forearms and hands. The same hands that touched me just hours ago while he fucked me so hard he made me forget who I was and where I was. My body hasn't forgotten a single second of it. I'm looking at his fingers wrapped around that glass and all I can think about is how they felt inside me…

And now I’m here in my wedding dress, realizing that this man has been breaking into my place, my sanctuary, and I am beyond help.

"I didn't count for how long."

"Try."

"Enough to know that you keep your coffee in a weird spot in a hall cupboard and your medical journals under the bed instead of on the shelf,

which is a fire hazard, incidentally."

I picture myself walking through my own front door after a twelve-hour shift, kicking off my shoes, dropping onto the sofa and falling asleep with the television on, and him having been there that morning. His hands on my mugs. His fingers on my books. The air in my home still warm with him and me breathing in his scent and not knowing.

"I'll need to sort out the house," I say, my voice steady, which surprises me. "I have to give notice. The management company will want the key back, and the pest control routine visit is in—" I'm wondering now why I never bought the house. I've always rented. Perhaps I just wanted freedom to leave if I wanted.

Freedom … the most important thing.

"You don't need to give notice."

"There's a contract, Laszlo. Normal people have contracts. I have to give two months' notice in writing."

"You don't need to give notice," he repeats, patient as a man explaining something to a child, "because you don't have a landlord. You have me."

My head starts spinning. Downstairs, faintly, the string quartet starts playing a classical version of Young and Beautiful, by Lana del Rey. Not exactly appropriate for a wedding reception.

Meanwhile, his words sink in somewhat.

"What did you say?"

"Hudson Property Management," he says, "is one of mine. It has been since before you moved in. You've been an excellent tenant, incidentally. Always on time. Very polite emails." A small pause, and then, with the mild pride of a man presenting references, he adds, "Who do you think made sure your central heat was fixed in record time in November?"

"The maintenance man?"

"Manon." He gives me a look that's almost gentle. "It was actually me because the regular guy was busy and I wanted to be certain the job was

done right. I also replaced the batteries in your smoke alarms because I don't trust the brand. And I fixed the leaking tap in your bathroom. You sent a very sweet text afterwards. *Thank you so much, that tap was driving me mad, kind regards, Manon.* Kind regards," he repeats, savoring it. "I've kept it."

"Were you there when I was home?"

"No."

"Were you ever there when Charles was home?"

His jaw tightens and his eyes narrow. His hesitation is unnerving. He scratches his cheek, and every hair on my arms stands up. My nipples harden under my wedding dress. I hate my body so much right now I could scream, because that look should terrify me and instead I feel myself getting more and more turned on.

"Once."

My hand finds my grandmother's blanket on the bed and grips it.

"He was asleep on your sofa," Laszlo says. "He'd left the front door unlocked."

"You just walked into my house."

"He didn’t lock the door. You live alone. He was careless."

"How long has this been going on?"

He puts his glass down. He straightens his cuff then lines the glass up with the edge of the dresser, quite meticulously. Now I wonder about those days when I arrived home after work and found things to be neater in my house than when I left them. My skin crawls and burns at the same time.

"Seven years," he says.

Seven years. I was around twenty-six. I was nobody, just an exhausted resident who could barely keep her head above water, and this man was already watching me. Why?

My legs go weak and I sit down on the bed because I don't think I can keep standing. My legs are still sore from this morning. But now, after marrying this man because I have to, I find out he has been inside my life for seven years, and he has been studying me for longer than I've been a trauma surgeon post-residency.

"You're upset," he says, sounding genuinely confused. Is he serious? "I've just told you that nothing in your recent life has ever been broken longer than a day. Most women would consider that romantic."

It’s the hardest thing in the world to keep my hands to myself because right now, I’d love to beat him senseless. Like he did to Charles. Only I’d bury him myself after. In a swamp—if we had any. After setting him on fire.

I am so confused, my head is reeling and I feel a little sick.

"Most women would consider that a documentary with a hotline number at the end," I say.

He laughs, delighted, the bastard. Crouching in front of me, he presses a kiss to my knuckles. His mouth is warm and I feel it between my legs, instant, like a wire pulled tight from his lips straight down through my center. I want to knee him in the face. I want to grab his shirt and pull him onto this bed and ride him until neither of us can walk.

I shouldn’t let him touch me. Why am I not angrier, hysterical even?

"There she is," he says against my skin.

"Get out."

His mouth stops moving against my hand. "Manon."

"Get out of this room, and close the door behind you. If you come back up here before I come down we will find out exactly how much damage a woman can do to an undertaker with the heel of a wedding shoe."

His eyes travel over my face, slow and thorough. I hold his stare. I am still Henri Valmont's daughter and don't look away from anyone.

Then he stands, grabs his glass and walks to the door.

"There's cake," he says from the doorway. "I had them make the lemon one."

After he leaves, I sit there for a long time, telling myself to breathe, but my chest feels tight.

Then I get up because a box by the wall is open and something in it has caught my eye. I lift out the photo magnet from my fridge, the selfie of Charles and me in the middle of Times Square three years ago, both of us laughing, him planting a kiss against my cheek. Someone has packed it carefully, but I can see through the bubble wrap. We're both younger, I'm so sure of my life. I wonder what the blurred strangers milling behind us in the gray afternoon were thinking and doing then. I had it all planned out. Now here I am.

I put the photo face down in the box.

I sit back down but the tears do not come. My heart is heavy, everything's black, but I cannot give more. What can I do? For now I have to go back down to my wedding reception, to my husband, to the lemon cake and pretend that I haven't just gotten married to a psychopath.

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# CHAPTER 17

Laszlo

"You're going to be late, love," I say to Manon, watching her eat the avocado toast that Dolores had made for breakfast. I'm so blissfully happy that I might burst, because now I have her, Manon, as my wife.

"No, I won't. I'm never late, and I have another three minutes," she replies, avoiding my gaze. She slept in that bedroom last night, surrounded by her books, and refused to come to mine. Yes, I wanted her to feel at home yet not pressured, so I'd given her a separate room because I never planned on us having sex near a corpse before the wedding. If I'd known, I would have made sure she'd move into my room right away.

But since we spoke, she made it a point that she didn't want to be anywhere near me. I did not want the staff to start gossiping, but everyone here was paid handsomely to keep their mouth shut. If they didn't, there'd be consequences.

I keep replaying the scene in the garage, dreaming about that moment. I never thought she'd let me have her like that so soon, but fucking hell, she is a lot of woman, made just for me. And her pussy… God, her pussy. I let out a groan and she frowns in reaction, yet doesn't look at me.

She's so beautiful, even while she's doing mundane things like eating, and I can stare at her all day long. My cock is semi-erect now. This is going to become a problem if she won't let me touch her again. When the truth came

out about my stalking tendencies, I thought she was going to lose it, but she was reasonable. Damn it, I must have played this really well on my end, since she accepted it without any outward drama. I thought, maybe this is just the beginning of something really special. But that thought has been put on hold…

"Stop staring at me while I'm eating. It's creepy, Laszlo," she says as she finishes her food and gets up, moving past me and rolling her eyes in a way I find adorable. She's wearing her scrubs, ready for a long shift at the hospital today, so I won't bother her. I've checked her schedule earlier on, because this is the kind of husband I am—the caring one, who buys his wife's hospital to make sure her workplace is secure.

"Have a good day, *ma macabre*, and try not to work too hard," I tell her when she's at the door.

She turns back, glares at me, and then leaves, shutting the door behind her —I mean, slamming it hard. She must be in a little bit of a mood, but that's understandable since her period is due in a couple of days. Yes, I'm also the kind of husband who knows when to expect the worst, but I took matters into my own hands. I told Dolores to prepare her food with primrose oil in there, so that eventually, when her period starts, her PMS symptoms will be less severe.

After she's gone, I go back to the kitchen, wash my hands, and head downstairs to the mortuary to work on Charles. Manon doesn't know this, but he's already in my fridge, and my company is handling the funeral. My men managed to convince his mother after the police notified her that her son was beaten up by a local gang to rob him, on my property. They took his ring. So far she has no clue her son’s girlfriend actually married the undertaker. I heard she’s not big on listening to the news and is quite the recluse. Everything in its own time.

That said, the woman seems to be a piece of work. She screamed like a hyena in pain for a few minutes then calmed down, as if nothing happened. I guess, in the scheme of things, she took the news well. I do not understand people. They’re strange.

I switch on the light when I reach my station in the basement, and immediately notice that things on my desk are out of order. I was here two days ago, working on another body, sewing the skin on the stomach that was torn during a bad accident.

The light flickers, and I look up at it, tensing up. I scan the room again. There is dust on the counter by the sink. Dust. There is never dust down here. I wipe my finger through it and stare at the gray smear like it's going to tell me something, and of course it doesn't.

My first thought is that someone was here because several of the newly washed towels are on the floor, and the place smells odd—not the usual clinical smell of bleach, but a tangy and metallic odor, as if someone had spilled blood all over the floor and didn't clean it. Dolores doesn't come here; she knows the basement is a no-go zone for her, and only a few of my inner circle show up here, only rarely.

I stand very still and try to think, but I can't, because nothing in this room is where it's supposed to be. The tools should be lined up, largest to smallest, edges square to the tray. That is how I leave them. That is how I always leave them. I don't leave scissors lying open. I don't leave scalpels loose. Someone has touched everything, and my whole body is starting to hum with this reality.

I go to the body. I already brought Charles out of the freezer a short while ago. He is as I would expect, covered, but the sheet is wrong—pulled back a few inches more at the top, like someone lifted it to look at his face and didn't bother to put it back the way I always insist it should be. My hands are shaking now. I fix the sheet. I smooth it down at the corners the way I like it, and it doesn't help because the fridges are behind me and I can feel them. When I turn around, one of the doors is half open.

*Half open.*

I never leave them open. Never. The cold is leaking out into the room. I walk over, pull the door and slide the tray out. It’s empty. The others are closed but I check those, too. Nothing's missing, nothing's moved, but that isn't the point. The point is the door was open, and I never leave them like that.

Someone stood down here in my basement, in my one quiet place, and went through my tools and my sacred space. Was this Manon? Was she here?

No. It's impossible. She doesn't have the combination. I lock this door with a code. My heart goes like a fist against my ribs.

I close the fridge properly and start cleaning. I can't stand it another second. I pick the towels up off the floor, fold them and put them back. I gather every scalpel and every pair of scissors to lay them out again, largest to smallest, edges square, the way they're meant to be. I wipe the dust off the counter, then wash my hands and scrub the smell of that metallic tang out of my nose as best I can. Only when everything is back in its place, when the room looks the way it's supposed to, do I let myself go back up the stairs.

I take my phone out in the kitchen and call Rafe.

"I need you to check something for me," I say. "Manon. Did she get to the hospital? Confirm she's on the floor."

"I saw her arriving and walking through the door, but give me a minute to confirm she's in the building, boss." He hangs up.

I put the kettle on because my hands need a job. I take it off again. Five minutes, and my phone rings.

"Boss." His voice is careful. "That's the thing. She got there—my guy's got her on the hospital cameras, driving in, parking, walking through the front doors in her scrubs, badge and all. And then, nothing. She never badged in, never made it to the floor. She's not in the system, nobody paged her, and nobody's seen her since the lobby. She walked through the front doors and she’s just—gone."

So she wanted to be seen. She parked where the cameras could get her, walked in so there'd be a record of it, and then vanished from a building full of people who'd have noticed a struggle. She walked out of that lobby on her own feet. I'd stake my life on it. What I can't stake anything on is what happened after the last camera lost her, whether she got into a car because she chose to or because someone put her there. Not knowing which is worse than either answer would be.

That is so much worse than being taken, because being taken isn't a choice, but this was.

I hang up without saying anything because I don’t trust myself, and go up to my office where I start making calls.

I call up my men, my allies. I tell them to drop whatever they're doing and find my wife, and when one asks me where he should start looking, I ask him if he's an idiot because if I knew where to start looking I wouldn't need him, would I? So I hang up on him.

I pull up the surveillance on my monitors—the house, the gates, the street cameras, the hospital feed Rafe's man already flagged—and watch her walk through those front doors again and again, in through the glass, not looking back once, and then nothing.

I click through feeds that should have her in them and don't. My whole face goes hot, along with the rest of me.

Dolores comes in with a double shot of espresso on a little tray and sets it down next to me. Then, in a fit of rage, I sweep the whole desk. Files, folders, the espresso, all of it goes flying, and the little cup shatters against the wall and leaves a brown streak running down the paint.

"What is wrong with you?" Dolores says, hands on her hips, unflinching. She’s been with me forever, and has no problem with chiding me.

"Just leave me alone," I snap. "For God's sake, get out."

She stops dead and gives me the same look she’d give me when I was nine years old and tracked mud through her clean kitchen. "Don't you dare speak to me like that, young man," she says. "I raised you better than this. I have been picking up after you since you were in diapers, and I will not be shouted at like I'm the help."

You do not win against this woman. I have tried for thirty-eight years and I have never once won. "You are the help, Dolores," I say. "That's literally your job." She narrows her eyes, and I hold my hands up. "I'm joking. I'm sorry. You're not the help, you're the general. Please. Just—make me another one, would you?"

She arches a brow.

“Please.”

She sniffs, satisfied, and bends down to gather the papers I threw, because she can't help herself. She mutters the whole time about my blood pressure and my father's temper and how I'll give myself a stroke. I smile at her while inside I am absolutely losing my mind, because my wife walked into a building on camera and walked out of existence and I cannot find her now. My Manon is gone and there is nothing in this world I can do about it.

The hours go by. I now start calling people who are not my people.

I call Marchetti, who has wanted a piece of my business for six years, and ask him, very calmly, very reasonably, whether he happens to have my wife.

There's a long pause on the line.

"Your what?" he asks. "Have I got your what?"

And I realize how it sounds, a man calling his rival to ask if he's misplaced his wife somewhere on his premises. I hang up, then call two more. I ask the Koviches.

I ask a guy who runs most of New Jersey, whom I haven't spoken to in four years, and he laughs at me for a full ten seconds before that call ends as well. By tonight it'll be all over the city that Laszlo Novak lost his wife four days after the wedding, yet I dial the next number anyway, and the next, until I've gone through every man in the city who I deem a rival or enemy. None of them take me seriously, and that’s no surprise.

Then there's no one left to call. At least, dialing gave my hands something to do. Now it's hours later and the waiting is unbearable. My elbows are on the desk, my face in my hands, and I keep dragging my palms down it like I can wipe this whole day off. My chest feels like an anvil dropped dead center on it. I’m about to combust.

I keep seeing horrible shit. Her in the trunk of someone else's car. Some man with his hand around her wrist, her scrubs, that face she made at me this morning turned on someone who won't find it adorable. I've dressed men who died gentler deaths than the ones I'm inventing for her. Charles’

death was nothing compared to what I’ll do to whoever laid so much as their pinky finger on her.

And then the laptop lights up on its own.

The screen goes bright, and for one insane moment I think it's a virus, some pop-up. Then the picture settles and I stop breathing.

It's a room I don't know. Dark, with a red light coming from somewhere at the bottom. Manon is in the middle of it, in a chair, her head down and her hair over her face, her wrists together in her lap. She isn't moving. Behind her, back where the light doesn't reach, two men stand in the dark, watching her.

I'm on my feet before I decide to stand. Every filthy thing I imagined today is on the screen in front of me, and all I can do is watch it happen through a screen I can't reach through, in a room I can't place. My hand is already on the phone to put every man I own on the road.

Then Manon lifts her head and looks straight into the lens, and our eyes meet. She's calm. There's no mark on her, no torn clothes, no blood, nothing that says anyone forced her into that chair.

The two men behind her step back and walk out of the frame. They move like they work for her. Nobody was holding her. She sat down in that chair and gave me ten seconds of the exact nightmare I'd been building all day, because she knew how long it would take to break me.

She wanted me to feel it. The trunk. A stranger's hand on her wrist. She put the whole thing in my head and then took it away, so I'd know she can make me believe anything she wants and leave me grateful when she tells me it wasn't real.

Then the red room is gone, and the screen changes to a place I know.

My basement. The steel table, the trays, the fridges along the back wall. Black and white, from the corner camera above the door. A timestamp in the bottom corner.

03:12 a.m.

Nine hours ago. While I was asleep upstairs.

The door opens and Manon walks in.

She takes her time. Her eyes go over the steel tables, the drain in the floor, the cold that gets into most people before they've said a word, and none of it touches her face. She stands in the doorway of my mortuary like she owns it. And I am not even surprised.

She must have gotten the code or she had it the whole time.

I think back through every evening, every time I went down with her somewhere behind me in the hall, and I can’t even recall that moment. I never noticed her looking when I was getting inside. I’ve watched her for so long, but she also was paying attention.

She goes to the tray first. Picks up a scalpel, considers it, sets it down two inches to the left. Then she picks up the next one, turns it so the edge faces the wrong way. She does the whole tray like that, slowly, one instrument at a time, and it's worse than if she'd swept them onto the floor, because she obviously thought about this process long and hard.

Then the towels. She takes them off the shelf one by one and drops them—not throws them, drops them, watching them land.

She walks to the fridges, opens the second door, slides the tray halfway out, looks in, slides it back. Leaves the door where it is.

She goes to the table. Lifts the sheet at the top, just enough, and looks at Charles's face. She holds it there for a while. Her expression changes as she stares at the man. She closes her eyes, then lets the sheet fall, not quite where it was.

Then she turns around and walks straight to the camera.

She stops under it and looks up. Right into the lens. Right at me.

"Good morning, husband."

Quiet. Steady. Not a hair out of place, like she's known about this camera for weeks and picked her moment. Whatever she came here to make me feel, it's working.

"You've been in my house. You've been in my car. You've been in my hospital, apparently, since you own it now." She picks a pair of scissors off the tray behind her and opens and closes them once, listening to the sound. "I thought I'd see what it feels like from the other side."

She puts the scissors back, open. She looks at the camera one more time, and then she reaches up and the screen goes to static.

I sit there.

My mortuary wasn't broken into. My wife walked in at three in the morning in her bare feet and rearranged my life while I slept above her, and then she got up, ate the toast Dolores made her, told me not to stare, and drove to work.

Fine. Message received. Very clever, *ma macabre*.

Now where the fuck are you?

The laptop answers me. The static clears and a second feed opens.

Different room. Color this time, daylight. A window, a radiator, a wall I know. I know the shape of that ceiling crack. I have seen this room in six hundred photographs.

Her house.

The timestamp says 1:41 p.m. Four hours ago. I was on the phone with Marchetti around that time, asking him if he had my wife, and my wife was sitting on the floor of the property I own, having used the keys she never gave back. I check the time again. Doesn’t matter. She's not there now. She was there hours ago and she filmed it, then waited until now to let me see.

She's still in her scrubs. She's sitting cross-legged with a cardboard box in front of her, pulling things out of it. A stack of photographs held with an elastic band. Envelopes. A knitted thing, small, a child's. A folder with a university crest on it.

I didn't know that box existed. I had been in that house, had photographs of all the rooms with all their contents. I never saw that box.

She looks up at the camera.

"Oh I had this under the floorboards, you see. You seem to think you know everything about me. That's what you said." She lifts the stack of photographs and taps them against her palm. "Okay. Let's check."

She holds the first one up, facing her, not me.

"What was the first operation I did on my own? Not assisted. Mine."

She waits, like I might answer.

"You don't know."

She puts the photograph down and picks up one of the letters.

"What did my grandmother call me? She had a name for me. Nobody else has ever used it."

Pause.

"You don't know."

The folder.

"Where did I go the night I failed my first surgical exam? I was gone until four in the morning. Somebody found me. Who?"

"You don't know."

She sets the folder down and looks at the lens.

"What was the worst day of my life, Laszlo?" Her voice is so flat, it kills me. "You've got information on me. Reports. It's in there somewhere. You just can't tell which one it was."

I rub my hand down my face, fast losing my mind.

"I figured you out. You know what coffee I order. You know what day my period's due. You know which side of the bed I sleep on and how many books I own and what time I leave work." She starts putting the things back into the box, carefully, the way I'd put my instruments back. "You don't know me. You know my schedule."

She closes the box then stands, lifts it onto her hip, and leaves. I can see she's leaving, taking that box somewhere I can't follow. She stops at the door and turns.

"Seven years watching me." A small smile, the first one. "And when you watch this, you still won't know where I am."

The screen goes black.

I sit in the dark of my office with the smashed cup on the wall and my hands flat on the desk, and suddenly I understand that … I have spent this entire day exactly where she wanted me. Nine hours behind her in my own basement, four behind her in her house every clue already cold by the time I found it. She's been ahead of me since three o'clock this morning, and she's ahead of me now. For the first time in seven years, I have no idea where my wife is.

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# CHAPTER 18

Manon

I feel good when I walk through the door of my father's estate. Better than good. I stood barefoot in Laszlo Novak's basement at three in the morning and moved his tools around while he slept, then went to my old house—thank goodness I still have the keys. There, I asked him four questions about my own life that his reports couldn't answer. I filmed all of it. By now he'll have watched both feeds.

I don't get it. Did he really think I would let this go? The bastard stalked me for years. He has been inside my home more times than I can count, touched my things, looked in my closets and drawers, and he moved my books. My precious collection of books. Not even Charles had that privilege.

He killed Charles, too. But the bastard was attacking me so both of them can go to hell. Of course he didn't have to use that much force on him, but that's beside the point. I'm not exactly blameless because I had sex with Laszlo right next to the body. I'm sick. I should be really embarrassed about it, but I'm not.

Getting the code to his precious mortuary was the easy part. He punches it in with his left hand and doesn't cover the keypad, and the second evening in that house I was standing four feet behind him in the hall.

It was Denis who helped me with the rest. He spotted the gray Audi that has been parked outside the hospital all week with its engine running. So this morning I walked through the front doors in my scrubs, went up to my office, left my phone on my desk, told a colleague to cover for me for a few hours, that I wasn’t well and needed rest, and slipped out through the service entrance at the back. Denis was waiting in his sister's old Peugeot, already swept for trackers, and my phone spent the afternoon in my office. The burner stayed in my bra.

The videos were Denis too. He has a cousin who installs security systems for half the venues in this city, and pulling the footage off my husband's own basement camera and pushing it to his laptop took him less than an hour. I told him when. Not straight away. Not when Laszlo went downstairs and found his towels on the floor. Hours later, after he'd about gone insane, realizing something was out of his control.

The second one I filmed myself, on the floor of my house, with the box open in front of me. I still have the keys. He never asked for them back.

The last favor came from my father. Dinner tonight, in the garden, and I asked him to invite the Novaks: Laszlo's parents, Constantine, his men. Papa didn't ask why, thank goodness.

The long, carved teak table is in the conservatory, with a view of the garden out back. The Novaks arrived on time, minus one. Laszlo's mother came alone, with apologies from her husband: urgent business, he's very sorry, he sends his best. Nobody asked what kind of business. Now she's sitting at the far end talking with mine, and Constantine is wedged between Février and Denis, who keep switching to French every time he tries to join the conversation.

There is one empty chair beside mine, because my mother believes married couples should sit together. Nobody has mentioned why he's not here yet.

"Ma chérie." My mother takes my face in both hands as I go round the table and bend down to kiss her. As I lean in, I see a fleeting darkness in her eyes. Sadness, worry maybe. "You look well. Marriage agrees with you."

"Marriage is wonderful, Maman." Guess I can live the lie.

"And Laszlo?" my father asks, pouring the wine. "He's joining us?"

"He wouldn't miss it for the world." I take my seat and shake out my napkin. "He had a busy day. I'm told it was eventful."

Denis develops a sudden cough while pouring water two seats down.

The appetizers have just come out when footsteps announce him, and every head at the table lifts. My husband comes around into the conservatory in a custom suit, freshly shaved, not a hair out of place, carrying flowers for my mother and a bottle for my father. He looks like a man who has had a pleasant, uneventful day.

That is not what I was expecting.

On our wedding day I found the room already made for me, my books already on the shelves, like he'd known which ones. When I told him I meant to stay in it the whole year, every night, his face went hard and his jaw clenched tight, and it meant he'd made up his mind about something and I wasn't going to like it. That's the look I braced for now—the clenched jaw, the cold face. For hours he didn't know where I was, and I expected him to walk in furious. Instead, he kisses my mother's cheek, shakes my father's hand, and works his way down the table like a politician on the campaign trail. Rafe is here too, seated between Constantine and Julien. Again, I made sure my brother would be here. After all, Laszlo never denies me anything.

Apparently, my husband’s most trusted man now earns a dinner invitation, while the rest of his men stand out front, pretending to admire the fountain.

Then Laszlo reaches me. He bends and kisses me softly. This isn’t on the agenda, dammit. A quiet murmur of approval goes down the table. To them, it looks like devotion. The problem is it feels like devotion to me too, and I wasn't ready for that.

"Ma macabre," he says against my mouth. "How was your day?"

"Long. Yours?"

"Fine." He sits, shakes out his napkin, then reaches for the wine. "Eat your appetizer. Your mother's watching."

I eat my appetizer.

He asks my father about the roses. He asks Constantine whether the Audi's due a service. He tells my mother the lamb smells wonderful.

“You look tired,” she says, looking much the same herself.

“It’s the season,” Laszlo replies. “Business is booming.”

I listen to the chatter with my fork in my hand, waiting for him to look at me … and he doesn't.

"Nothing to say about this morning?" I ask, quietly, under-the-table talk.

He butters a piece of bread.

"You wanted my attention. You have it."

"Your basement looked different when I left it."

"It looks fine now."

"The towels."

"Folded."

"The scalpels. The tools."

"Largest to smallest. Lined perfectly. Thank you for asking."

Nothing. Not a flicker. He is buttering bread. I try the last one, the one I know is real, and keep my voice light.

"You couldn't find me."

His glass stops halfway to his mouth for the briefest of moments. Then he drinks, sets the glass down, and turns to Rafe to ask whether the gate camera's been fixed.

But I saw it. I know exactly where I drove that knife, and how I twisted it.

"So," my father says, down the table. "A honeymoon. Are you planning one?"

"We've been so busy," I start.

"I'm planning something special for my wife," Laszlo says. "Somewhere quiet. I've already chosen the spot."

"How romantic," says his mother.

"I'm a romantic man," he agrees.

"He really is," I tell the table. "He's always thinking of me. Sometimes I feel like he's with me even when he's not there."

"In fact," Laszlo says, reaching into his jacket, "since both families are here, I have something to share."

He produces a folded set of papers and smooths them flat on the tablecloth. For one glorious moment I think it's the honeymoon itinerary, because I am an idiot who never learns.

"I've bought us a burial plot," my husband says to the table. "Two graves, side by side, one large headstone on the hill at Williamstown. Morning sun, view of the river. I paid extra to have the path between them removed, so nothing separates us. These are the headstone designs. Black granite. Pass them around."

And they do. Constantine nods and says it's a fine location. Laszlo's mother presses a hand to her chest, looking somewhat disgusted. Then she arranges her face. "What a wonderful idea. Most people never plan ahead."

My mother has stopped moving with her fork in the air. My father is looking at the drawings of his only daughter's future grave over the top of his glasses with an expression I have never seen on him.

"The inscriptions are already commissioned," Laszlo goes on. "On one side it says: Laszlo Novak - Loving Husband. On the right side is inscribed: Manon Novak - Devoted Wife. Then underneath, United in Life, Never Apart Again. No dates yet, obviously." He takes a sip of his wine. "That part's flexible."

The page reaches me. There it is. My name, carved in a fancy font, dignified enough for a tombstone.

We had an agreement. One year. Twelve months as his wife and then I walk away and get my life back. That was the only reason I said yes to any of this. Now this man has spent a fortune on Belgian granite and passed it around my family's table like a christening photo, and both families are cooing over the design while my husband quietly informs me that the exit I've been counting down to doesn't exist.

"Laszlo," I say, keeping my voice pleasant for the company. "You bought me a grave because I moved your tools?"

"No."

He isn't looking at the drawings. He's looking at me, his expression unreadable.

"I bought you a grave because for five hours today I didn't know whether you were alive or dead."

I open my mouth, but can’t say anything.

I've spent my whole working life around frightened men—fathers going gray in corridors, waiting on news, boys on stretchers making me swear I won't phone their mothers after they got hurt somewhere they shouldn’t be—and the thing nobody warns you about is how little their fear shows. Mostly it's just a man going numb, holding something he's forgotten is in his hand. A wine glass, stopped halfway to his mouth. Exactly like this one.

He sat in that office for hours and hours believing I was dead. And then he got up and went out, and bought the burial plot.

I pick up my glass, mostly so my mother won't see what my hands get up to without it. "To eternity, darling. I want to approve the font first."

His jaw tightens. Barely. A flicker I only catch because he lets me.

Underneath the smile I've already decided I'm not letting this go. He wants to spend money on our death? Wonderful. Death is his whole industry, and I'm about to become his best customer. On his dime.

"And how is Nicko doing?" my mother asks, to lighten the tone of this conversation. That would have been a lovely gesture if the person who put

Nicko in the hospital weren't her own son-in-law.

Julien opens his mouth, and I kick him under the table before whatever is in his head can make it out into the garden. He’s been blissfully quiet so far. I know I’m going to have to sit with him one day, and talk to him about that video. About him killing a man. I hate to see what the family business is doing to him, and wish he’d have the balls to quit like I did.

"Recovering," Constantine says. "He's out of the hospital. He's on soft food and communicates by whiteboard, which has improved him as a conversationalist."

"The whiteboard was my idea," Laszlo says.

"He wrote something obscene about you on it yesterday."

"Then he's healing nicely."

"Give him our best," my mother says warmly, and moves the conversation on to the roses. A much safer direction for a dinner chat. Somehow, she’s loosened up a little. Perhaps she figured out whatever is in her head cannot possibly be weirder than what’s happening with her daughter and son-in-law.

The main course arrives. Laszlo's hand settles on my thigh under the tablecloth, and I wait for the grip, the marks, whatever he's going to do to me today. But he does nothing untoward, thumb moving in slow circles against the silk, while he asks my father about import routes. Every so often his fingers tighten a fraction. Not punishment. Checking. Like he needs to confirm I'm still in the chair.

I press my knees together and blame the wine.

I make it through the lamb. I make it through my father telling Constantine about the new berths. Then I fold my napkin, place it beside my plate and rise.

"Excuse me. I'm just going to powder my nose."

"Don't be long, ma chérie," my mother says.

I don't answer. I walk back past the long windows and don't look back once. I just need a few minutes alone, somewhere Laszlo and his deep blue eyes and his terrible calm can't reach me. Somewhere I can put my back against a locked door and breathe like a normal woman before I have to go out there and be his wife again.

I climb the stairs to the big bathroom by my old bedroom, the nearest one, the biggest one, with the brass lock that actually holds. I go in, and shut the door behind me.

I'm washing my hands when the door opens behind me. I flinch—I wasn't expecting anyone, least of all him—and I snap my gaze up to the mirror. There he is. He turns the lock. Then, because he's who he is, he straightens the hand towel hanging crooked on the rail before he even looks at me.

"Do you mind?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I thought you were dead."

He says it quietly, his back against the door, hands loose at his sides. He reaches past me to straighten a bottle on the shelf, turns it so the label faces out, and waits. I watch his hands do it while facing the mirror and can't make myself turn around.

"Obviously I wasn't."

"I know that now."

"You had a video of me sitting on my own floor. You knew where I'd been."

"Where you'd been. Not where you were the moment I was watching." He hasn't moved. "Every time my phone rang, I expected someone to tell me they'd found your body."

The tap's still running, so I turn it off and then I dry my hands. I can't think of a single thing to say, which has never once happened to me in my life.

He takes a step towards me and stops close enough that I can smell his cologne.

"There you are," he says.

"What?"

"You care that you hurt me. You've been trying to hide it since the drinks came round."

"I don't care. I'm a doctor. I recognize distress."

"Manon."

"You bought me a grave. That's not a normal response, Laszlo."

"I've never claimed to be normal."

"You don't love me." It comes out harder than I meant. "You want to own me. That's not the same thing."

He doesn't answer right away. His eyes drop to my mouth and come back up.

"There isn’t much difference between the two."

We're inches apart now. His hands stay at his sides and he won’t touch me, because I have to be the one to bridge that gap. He's going to stand here, however long it takes, until I'm the one who reaches for him.

"You still don't own me."

"Then stop coming back to me."

I kiss him.

I can't stand waiting a second longer, so I break this insane moment myself. I grab him by the lapels and pull his mouth down to mine. For a second he lets me have it my way. Then his hand fists in my hair and he takes complete control of the kiss. It isn't gentle now. His teeth catch my lip. He walks me back a step until my hips hit the counter.

Then his hands close on my waist and he lifts me onto the marble beside the sink like I weigh nothing. God help me, it does something to my insides I'll be taking to my grave. Which, conveniently, he's already bought.

"Spread your legs."

"Laszlo."

"I've been extremely well behaved today, considering." A shadow of a smile, fast gone. "Spread your legs."

I do. For research purposes.

He pushes my dress up to my hips, and the look on his face at the sight of the soaked silk between my thighs is nearly pain. Then he hooks two fingers into my underwear and drags it down my legs so slowly, it's insulting. Over my knees. Over one heel, then the other. And then he folds it. He actually folds it into a neat square, edges matched, and slides it into his inside pocket like a pocket handkerchief.

"That's the second pair this month," I say. "I'm going to start invoicing you."

"Send it to my accountant." He sinks to his knees on my mother's bathmat and hooks my thighs over his shoulders. "He's stopped asking questions."

Then his mouth is on my folds and whatever I was about to say leaves me entirely.

He doesn't tease me this time. He licks into me slow and deep and filthy, drags the flat of his tongue up to my clit and circles it exactly how my body likes, first try, like he's got the schematics, and my fingers bury themselves in his immaculate hair and wreck it. He groans when I pull, and the vibration nearly ends me on the spot. Then his fingers join in, two of them sliding into me, curling, finding the spot Charles never once located in four years, and hoarse sounds fill my mother's bathroom.

It's too fast and I can't stop it. I don't want to. All that tension today, it all comes down to this, to his mouth, and my body isn't interested in my dignity. My heels press into his back. My thighs start to shake around his ears. The heat coils tight and low and I'm climbing, climbing… and he feels it, the bastard. He feels me getting close and keeps me right there, just

under, one stroke of his tongue short of the edge, until I'm shaking and swearing. I'd beg too if I had the words left.

And then, right when I'm one lick away, when everything in me is pulled to breaking, Laszlo stops.

He doesn't even pretend it wasn't on purpose. He pulls his mouth off me, rests his cheek against the inside of my knee, and waits.

"Don't you dare stop."

"Problem?" He presses one unhurried kiss to my inner thigh.

"Finish what you started, husband."

"I finish everything I start. Ask anyone."

His mouth returns. He takes me right back up, sucking my clit until my heels dig into his back and my hips are riding his face with no dignity whatsoever. This time I try to be clever. I hold still. I bite my lip. I keep my breathing level.

He stops right when I’m just about to climax. Son of a bitch, he must sense it.

"Right there," he says against my thigh, his mouth shining with me. "That's where I'm keeping you tonight. On the edge, so your greedy pussy will soak your mama’s chair."

"I fucking hate you."

"You're dripping down my chin, ma macabre. Turn around."

"What?"

"Hands and knees. On the counter. Your mother has excellent taste in marble. Face the mirror."

And God forgive me, I do it. I climb onto my mother's counter on all fours, my dress shoved up around my waist, bare from the hips down, and in the mirror I watch him take a slow look at what's his.

"Look at yourself," he says gruffly, and in the mirror I can see him straining against his pants. “I see you invited Julien. You knew I wouldn’t object, since it came from you. You’re making me go back on my word. You must pay for that too.”

Then his hands spread me open. His mouth is on me from behind, and my arms nearly buckle. It's worse like this. Deeper. Filthier. He lifts away for a beat and spits, warm against my other entrance, and I whimper out loud when he starts licking me there, his fingers easing into my pussy at the same time. And my whole body shakes.

Then he returns to my pussy, one hand gripping my hip hard enough to bruise while with the fingers of the other he works my clit in slow, merciless circles. I can see everything in the mirror. My wrecked face. My knuckles white on the marble. His dark head moving behind me. He drives me up to the edge and abandons me there. Drives me up, and abandons me. Every time I clench around nothing he pulls away and waits, patient and unbothered, until the wave dies down and leaves me hanging. Then he starts the whole climb again.

By the fourth time I'm almost there and he's torn it away from me. There are tears running down my face and I don't even care.

By the fifth I've lost every scrap of pride. My forehead drops to the cold marble and I hear myself say it out loud, hating how broken it sounds.

"Please."

"Again."

"Please, Laszlo. Please. I'm begging you. Just let me come, please."

"There it is." He straightens up behind me, takes out his pocket square. Not my underwear, the actual pocket square—the man came equipped. With it, he wipes his mouth. "That's five. One for every hour I spent today not knowing where my wife was."

"You cannot leave me like this."

"I can. Watch me." He eases my dress down and smooths it flat, then leans over my shoulder, mouth at my ear, both of us looking at me in the mirror.

Flushed. Shaking. Ruined. "Here's my promise to you, Manon. The next time you come, you'll be on our plot in Williamstown. On the grass, over your own name in black granite, stuffed full of my cock, screaming loud enough to wake the residents. That's where. That's how. Not with your fingers, or the shower head. If you cheat, I'll know." He kisses the corner of my jaw, gently, like we've just finished a slow dance. "You don't get to disappear on me. Not in a hospital, not in this bathroom, not in the ground. That's what today costs."

Then he unlocks the door, checks his cuffs in the mirror over my head, and leaves me on my mother's bathroom counter, soaked and empty and shaking, with dessert waiting downstairs.

I stare at myself for a long moment. My hair is destroyed. My legs won't hold me yet. My underwear is in his pocket.

He's insane. He bought me a grave. He put his mouth on me five times in my mother's bathroom and walked out, and I sat at that table an hour ago and played my game. But I kissed him anyway.

I fix my hair, splash my face with cold water and pat it dry. Then I go back downstairs, back to the party, to the conservatory and the empty chair waiting beside him.

Somewhere in these last months I’ve wanted to stop coming back to him. To walk away the moment I could.

I'm halfway down the stairs before I let myself admit that I can't.

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# CHAPTER 19

Laszlo

It's been four days since the dinner at her parents' house, and I'm still fucking yearning for my wife who won't even touch me.

Manon sleeps in my bed every night now—every night the hospital doesn't keep her, anyway. I am not sure if she shares my bed out of will or fear, and I don’t think I want the answer to that. When the shifts run long she stays at work, on a cot in some on-call room with a mattress thinner than the ones I put in my cheapest caskets, which offends me professionally. The rest of the time she's here. In my house. In my bed. An arm's length away and colder than a corpse.

At least, I won the battle to have her in my bed, after the stunt she pulled. She owed me.

It isn't that I don't want to touch her. God knows I do. I want to pull her back against me in the dark and put my mouth on the back of her neck, feel her fall asleep, her breaths even. But she lies there stiff on her own side of the mattress and lets me know without a single word that I'm not welcome to get close. She treats this marriage like a contract—that’s what I proposed, after all. She's counting down the year she thinks she owes me, ticking off the days one by one, certain that when they're up I'll shake her hand and let her walk out of my life.

But I'm Laszlo Novak, and no one has ever said ‘no’ to me. Besides, I already know that this woman is the love of my life. The fact she’s not aware of this fact is irrelevant.

I'm never letting her go.

I glance at my watch. It's eleven o'clock, and I'm stalling at the door, knowing that my wife will be home soon. I haven't seen her for almost two days, so I'm at the bottom of the stairs, ready to leave, when I finally hear the gate. I don't need to look. Daniel opens the gate at a different speed for everyone, faster for her because of how she drives like she's got a grudge against the driveway itself.

It's her old blue Honda, the one she still insists on driving even after I told Rafe to take her to the Maserati dealership to pick out a new car at last. She bluntly refused.

She comes through the door in her coat, her hair a mess. There's a coffee stain on her cuff and a smudge of pen on the heel of her hand. She looks like something the night shift dragged backward through the whole of medicine.

She's the best thing I've seen in days.

"Good morning, wife."

"It's still morning?" She drops her keys in the bowl by the door—the bowl I put there in week two, which she uses while pretending she doesn't know why it exists. "Tragic."

"Long one?"

"What do you think?"

"How was it?"

She stops with one shoe half off and looks at me properly for the first time, her nose wrinkling like I've walked in trailing the smell of my own mortuary behind me.

"Why do you care?"

"Because you were gone many hours and I'd like to know what they were like."

"You already know what they were like. You probably have the CCTV."

"The cameras in your hospital are for security purposes only, and the resolution is a disgrace. I'd never learn anything useful from them."

"Comforting."

"I'm asking you," I say, "because I want you to tell me."

And there’s the kind of question she never has an answer ready for. She can bat away my threats and my jokes all day long, but the minute I say something to her plainly, something I actually mean, she goes quiet. Just for a moment. She covers it by bending down to pull the other shoe off, but I saw it, and she knows I did.

"It was a shift, Laszlo." She speaks to the floor. "Long one. We lost one we shouldn't have … a young one." She toes her shoe off. "You'd have liked him. He's your demographic now."

Christ, I want to marry her again.

"Manon."

"What."

"I'm not angry about the dinner and what happened after," I tell her, and it's a total lie because the image of her spread out on that bathroom counter will be forever engraved into my brain.

She straightens up slowly. "I don't remember asking for absolution."

"You didn't. I'm giving it away free. It's a promotional period." I take my coat off the hook. "You broke into my mortuary. You went down into the one room in this world that's mine, and you put your hands on every tool I own, moved every last thing, and left it for me to find. Then you vanished for a day and let me wonder. Your point was well made. I answered it at dinner. Call it a draw and come back to the table."

"A draw." She laughs, once, with no warmth in it. "You bought us burial plots, Laszlo. You designed the headstones yourself and passed the drawings around at my mother's table like vacation photos."

"They're very good drawings. The stonemason studied in Carrara."

"You're mentally unstable."

"Everyone says so, but you still married me."

"To save my brother."

"Details." I check my cuffs. "We have dinner tonight. Eight o'clock. Dolores is doing the veal."

"I'd rather die."

"I imagined as much. I've planned around it." I open the door. "Wear whatever you like. You'll be beautiful and savage in any of it."

She holds up her middle finger, her only comeback. Yeah, she really is worn out. She just stands there in the hallway in her creased scrubs, arm out straight, holding the finger up at me. I see she’s been biting her nails to the quick. She’s lost a patient—that got to her. Always did. My heart squeezes in my chest. I really want to comfort her, but she doesn't want me to.

"Noted," I say. "There's food in the warmer. Eat before you sleep, or Dolores will come up and sit on the bed until you do. She's done it to me, so I can tell you there's no dignity in it."

The finger stays up until I close the door. God, the commitment.

Daniel drives me to our second home. The viewings happen downstairs and we take care of business upstairs, in the room with the caskets arranged like showroom models. There's a family down in reception choosing music for a Thursday service when I arrive, so I go up the back stairs to avoid them.

They're all waiting for me when I walk in. Rafe, Tomek, and Constantine are already sitting at the table. With them, old Février, who’s been invited once more for some reason. Also, since the marriage, I understand our families are shifting to a new dynamic of alliance and collaboration. In short, a miracle.

I pour myself a coffee and sit down at the head of the table.

"Go on," I tell Rafe.

"Here's where we've been since Wes." Rafe doesn't waste time. "Back in March, somebody started paying one of our men to pack drugs into the repatriation caskets we fly home for burial. We were sending people back to their families with heroin packed underneath them and my name signed on the customs paperwork. We caught the man who was opening the boxes at the other end, and we caught the broker who set it up. That was Wes and we got him. Before he stopped being useful to us he gave up two things. An address in Bushwick, and the name of a man inside the port authority."

"Tell me about the address," I say.

"We went and watched it for three nights before we made our move." He puts a folder on the table and slides it across to me. "It's a packing house, belonging to Marku's people. We sat outside and photographed everyone going in and out. Here's the part you're not going to like."

I open the folder. There are photographs of vans, men carrying boxes, a loading door left open at night.

"The smuggling never stopped when we shut our own caskets down," Rafe says. "It didn't even slow down. They're still moving the product out through the same port, packed in caskets, exactly the same way. The only thing that's changed is they don't need our caskets to do it anymore, because now they've got their own. Turn to the third photograph."

I do that. It's a van, the side of it freshly painted with a name written across it in neat lettering that I have driven past a hundred times and never once given a second thought to.

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"Ferro's," I say.

"Right. A year ago they were two run-down parlors buried in debt and about to go under. Then, sometime in the spring somebody paid off everything they owed, bought them a fleet of vans, opened three new showrooms, and started undercutting us on every prepaid plan in the city. We assumed they'd

found a stupid bank somewhere." He taps the folder. "They didn't. Somebody bought Ferro's quietly, through a stack of shell companies, and turned it into exactly what we used to be for Marku. A funeral home that ships caskets nobody ever thinks to open."

Silence reigns for a moment, and for once even Tomek keeps his mouth shut.

So this is what's been done to me. Somebody hasn't simply copied the way I move product. They've built a replica of my outfit—the respectable business at the front, the caskets, the paperwork no one ever questions—and set it down in my city, on my streets, taking my clients out from under me with money made off drugs. It is the most flattering insult anyone has ever paid me, and I would very much like to meet the person responsible so I can shake his hand and then bury him in one of his own boxes.

"Février," I say. "Your turn."

The old man takes his time answering, because at his age wasting mine is one of the few pleasures he has left. "The name your broker gave you inside the port," he says. "We looked into him. He's one of ours. Fifteen years he's worked Henri's side of the customs house." He pauses. "Henri knew nothing about it. Nobody told him those caskets were going through, and nobody put his man on them with his blessing. Whoever is behind this brought a traitor inside our family the same way they bought one inside yours."

"So the two of us are being robbed by the same man," I say.

"It would seem," Février says, "that some *fils de pute* is building himself a third family out of men he's stolen from the other two."

Tomek can't hold it in any longer. "Then tonight we burn all Ferro showrooms to the ground and—"

"Tomek." I keep my voice level.

He shuts his mouth.

"We don't touch Ferro yet," I say. "Ferro's just the glove. I want the hand inside it. Whoever's been paying off his debts. That's the man really running him, and that's the man I actually want."

Constantine gets up out of his chair, crosses the room without a word, and sets his phone down on the table right in front of me, screen facing up.

I'm already irritated at being interrupted, but I look down at it.

"Everyone shut up," I say, because the men have started talking again, and I press play.

My wife is standing in a showroom I don't own. She's running one finger down the lid of a gold-plated casket the way another woman might stroke a handbag she's deciding whether to buy. It's Ferro's—the same lettering from the van in my folder is on the wall right behind her head. She turns and looks straight into the camera she knows is filming her, and gives it a little wave.

“The video is private. She created a group chat with our families in it,” Constantine says. “I think you are in it too.”

I pick up my phone and see the notification from “Team Laszlo & Manon” and two heart symbols on either side of the names. That’s what she called the group chat. Somehow I haven’t heard it come in. Then the phone buzzes in my hand with a receipt. Three hundred and ninety thousand. And underneath the figure, one line of text.

Happy six-month anniversary in advance, husband. Picked out the one I'm putting you in.

Février leans forward over his cane to get a better look at the screen, and his expression morphs to delighted. Clearly, he finds this amusing.

Then my own phone starts ringing. It's Petrov, my banker, so I answer it and put him on speaker, because the whole room might as well suffer through it with me.

"Mr. Novak." His voice comes out thin and careful. "Your wife has just spent three hundred and ninety thousand on a casket."

"I know. I've seen it." I pick my coffee back up. "She's finally showing me some affection."

"It's a gold-plated one, boss. Ferro's most expensive model. She had it delivered to the dining room and left the receipt sitting on your dinner plate."

"I own six funeral homes, Petrov, and my wife still went and gave her money to the competition. I could have buried me at cost."

"Sir, do you want me to freeze the—"

"No. Raise her limit."

Petrov goes silent.

"Raise it," I tell him, standing up and buttoning my jacket. "She's gone and picked out the box she intends to put me in, Petrov, and she chose the gold-plated one. That's the closest thing to a love letter I've had off her since the wedding."

I hang up.

Tomek is openly grinning down at the carpet now. Février looks like a man who came expecting a grim war meeting and got a comedy instead, and I already know he's going to go home and describe every detail of it to Henri over dinner. Rafe is the only one in the room not enjoying himself. The thing is that after twenty years I know that when the man isn't laughing, there's a reason.

"Say it," I tell him.

"There's one more thing you need to know." He says it to the table rather than to me. "We've been losing clients all month. Families canceling their prepaid contracts, walking away from their deposits, taking their funerals to Ferro's instead. Six of them in four weeks. And people don't throw away a deposit, so I went through every one of those files to work out how each family ended up at Ferro's in the first place. Who put the idea in their heads."

"And?"

"Every single one of them came from the same place." Now he looks up at me. "The hospital. There's a doctor who works at the hospital morgue, and

he's friendly with all the doctors. When a family loses someone, he's often the first person they deal with. Lately he's been slipping them a Ferro's card and telling them how wonderful the place is. He only started doing it a month ago. Because somebody he's fond of asked him to."

He doesn't need to say her name. The receipt is still glowing on Constantine's phone in the middle of the table.

So this is Manon. Standing in a hospital corridor sweet-talking some mortician into sending grieving families to my rival, purely to get under my skin. A wife taking her revenge on her husband, and doing it well, because of what he’s done to keep tabs on her. It's petty and it's clever, and knowing her, she has enjoyed every minute of it.

The trouble is that she has no idea what Ferro's actually is. I’m positive about that. It’s unfortunate that she’s doing this now of all times, but she’s the last person who’d be in on the bigger issue.

And underneath all of it, one thing needles at me more than the money or the video: I just saw my wife come home a few hours ago, beyond exhausted, barely able to get her shoes off. I told her to eat and sleep. I walked out that door believing I was leaving her safe, tucked up and dead to the world. And the moment my car cleared the gate, she got up, washed up, changed her clothes, and walked into the enemy's flagship showroom to buy herself a casket.

She doesn't know that the pretty showroom she filmed herself in moves heroin through its caskets. She doesn't know that the men who own it have bought traitors inside two families already. And as of this morning, thanks to a video she posted herself, those men know one thing about me that they never had to lift a finger to find out.

They know my wife walks into their buildings on her own and buys things from them. Now they have her name and they know who she is.

The anger drains straight out of me, all at once, leaving me with a sinking feeling. Dread, even.

"Find me the man behind Ferro's," I tell the room. "And Rafe, from today I want two more men on my wife, wherever she goes."

"She'll notice them. She notices everyone."

"Then she can throw out more of my money."

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# CHAPTER 20

## Manon

I shut my locker then sit down for a minute to catch my breath. My hands are shaking slightly.

"Hey, I think we should grab a coffee together," says one of my colleagues, a handsome, dark-haired doctor I had a crush on once, way before Charles.

"No, I'm fine. I just need to get home and get some sleep," I say, giving him a warm and sympathetic smile. We were the last two surgeons left from our shift, and it was a tough one. A young girl passed and I couldn't save her. Fuck, why did I choose this job? Sometimes it feels like I can't cope, but in the end I do, because someone has to. Because sometimes, I save a life. Just not today.

"Manon, you did everything you could, but fate had other plans for this young lady," he adds, as if that changes anything. I don't think fate had anything to do with it. I just didn't try hard enough.

When he finally leaves, the silence is deafening. I try to breathe, but the sadness washes over me. It's close to nine in the morning, so I grab my things and head down to the morgue. I really should be going home, and it disturbs me to admit that I would love to be taken care of by my husband right now. It's been almost six months since circumstances brought us together, and as much as I loathe to admit this, we've developed a certain

connection. I still hate his guts, but the man treats me well, and he takes care of even the slightest inconvenience.

The morgue is three floors down and cold as hell. The elevator doors open to mingling scents of bleach and peony, because Daphne, my friend and morgue technician, keeps a reed diffuser on her desk in open defiance of every regulation ever written. Last month it was fig. The dead of this hospital go out smelling like a spa in Provence and nobody has ever complained.

It’s been a while since I’ve been here, but I sorely need it today. I step over a box of files, then a second box, and follow the lamplight to her desk. There are four mugs on it, a packet of cookies, a screwdriver, and a paperback with the cover ripped off that I really need to talk to her about—you can't treat books like that. A jacket hangs on the chair behind her, halfway falling off. Behind her is the fridge wall, and every inch of it is spotless, labeled, perfect. The chaos runs right up to that steel and then stops dead as on that side, everything is in order.

Daphne has her feet up on a small filing cabinet. She’s eating cereal out of a mug, hair escaping from a chopstick. She's the classic redhead—stunning, slim, and utterly chaotic, though not every woman with red hair gets to look like that. She's extraordinary, even by those high standards.

"Oh good," she says, not looking up. "A live one."

"Barely."

"I've been down here on double shift. For all I know there's been a coup." She points her spoon at the chair she stole from radiology. There's a stack of death certificates on it, a sweater, and a tangerine. "Move all that."

I move all that and sit. Upstairs everyone's been using pure diplomacy with me since early morning, speaking with careful tones and treating me with a kid glove. But Daphne talks to me like I've wandered into her kitchen, which is the entire reason I'm down here instead of in my car.

"Coffee's fresh," she says. "Well, it's hospital coffee. Fresh is subjective."

"I'm fine."

"You're gray, that's what you are." She looks at me over the mug, one beat too long. The girl came down here two hours ago. Daphne knows exactly whose table that was, but she says nothing about it. That is the whole deal between us. She doesn't ask about the ones I request to be moved here, and I don't ask why she can't keep a desk neat but has never once misfiled a body since she worked here.

I’ve never been one for friends, or people in general. Somehow, for Daphne, I’ve found myself making an exception, even though she hasn’t been here long.

She puts the mug down. "So. Has your husband fucked you yet?"

"No."

That's not entirely a lie. We did it once on our wedding day, after he killed Charles, and it was the best sex of my life, but I will never admit that to him for as long as I live. These days he wants me, I know he does, but I'm stubborn. After all that happened, all he said, he can keep right on dreaming about having me.

"Still?"

"Still."

"Manon." She takes her feet off the cabinet, which for Daphne means standing up. "Six months, married to that. And nothing."

"There was—" I wave a hand, trying not to think about it, because the truth is, I've been climbing the walls. I'm attracted to Laszlo. The man looks like a god, and I'm holding out purely to make him suffer. Seven years of stalking me doesn't get forgiven overnight. "There was a thing. At my mother's. In the bathroom."

"A thing."

"We're not talking about the thing."

"We're absolutely talking about the thing—"

"You've never even met him."

"I don't have to. A man that is determined to have you is not a man you run from, Manon. That's a man you use."

"He's a criminal, Daphne. I keep telling you that." Yeah, I even told her that. The only one I've ever spoke to about my background. Hope I won't ever regret it. I'm either incredibly stupid or incredibly attuned to this friendship.

"And I keep telling you my last three boyfriends were accountants, so forgive me if I don't clutch my pearls." Spoonful of cereal. "He's rich, he's odd, he knows your schedule better than HR does. If that's a criminal, sign me up." She points the spoon at me. "One year, you keep saying. Six months left, you keep saying. That's the weirdest thing I've ever heard, especially since you're dying to fuck his brains out."

"I'm leaving."

"Course you are."

"I am."

"Mm." She goes back to her cereal. She won't argue with me. She just lets the silence sit there until I hear the thing she isn't saying, loud and clear in my own head.

I realize I've been lining her pens up. All of them, nib to nib, straight as a scalpel tray, and I don't remember starting. I know exactly whose habit that is, and how I caught it. I put them down. Daphne reaches over without a word and knocks them out of line with one finger, watching my face the whole time. The cow.

"Go home, Manon. You're no good to me like this."

I stand and head for the door, but then I hear her calling my name. When I turn around, the humor is gone from her face. She was the one who took the girl in this morning, washed her, laid her out, folded her hands. For a moment she isn't joking about anything at all.

"She wasn't yours to save, Manon." A beat. "Don't drag her home with you."

"See you in a couple of days."

"Yes, but next time remember the croissant."

The drive home takes twenty minutes, but the whole thing passes in a haze and I don't remember any of it. Daniel has the gate open before I've even come to a stop. I pull up on the gravel and sit there for a moment with the engine ticking before I can make myself go in.

Finally, I force myself out of the car and go inside. The house is warm and smells of coffee—the Italian roast he has shipped over, because God forbid that a Novak be caught drinking instant or cheap drip coffee like the rest of us common mortals. It's ground fresh at quarter past seven every morning, on the dot, because he can't do a single thing without a schedule attached to it. I stand in the hallway with my keys over the bowl, and my fingers won't cooperate.

"Good morning, wife."

He's at the bottom of the stairs in his shirtsleeves, cufflinks in, jacket over his arm, I imagine on his way out to bury half the city and threaten the other half. He says something back—some remark about the hour, or the state of my hair, the opening move in the game we play across this hallway every single morning—and I want it.

That's the pathetic truth. I stand here gripping my coat and the one thing I want is to be home getting the attention of an undertaker. Even insults will do.

"Morning," I manage.

And then I've got nothing else. I don't even hear the rest of what he says. There's no juice in me this morning, so I hover with my keys in my hand.

That's what gives me away. He’s seen me in this catatonic state before, but I don’t even have the energy to give him the middle finger or turn my back to him. I got nothing today. Absolutely nothing.

Not even tears.

He sets the jacket down on the banister and crosses the hall to me.

"Manon. What happened?" All humor is out of his voice.

I don't answer him in the hallway. But before I turn for the stairs I look at him properly, and that's a mistake, because there's no game on his face this time. He's looking at me like he understands exactly what losing a patient does to me. It's happened in front of him before, and those times I managed to hide it, to bury the hurt so deep behind a wall of ice that he'd never find it. Not today. Today the pain is on my face before I can catch it and tuck it away. So I look away, and go upstairs.

I get to our room, shut the door, and start on my scrubs. I pull the top over my head and drop it on the floor, which I never do, then sit on the edge of the bed to deal with my shoes and find that my hands won't obey me. I just cannot switch off. I fumble with a lace like it's the most complicated thing I've ever done.

Laszlo opens the door and comes in. I should tell him to knock, but there's really no point. He crosses the room and kneels down in front of me without a word. Gently, he moves my hands aside and unties my shoes, first one and then the other, and sets them side by side by the bed. Then he stands me up with a hand under my elbow and finishes undressing me in silence. He takes off my bra, my pants, my underwear. I don't even care at this point; this man has seen me naked already, and I'm too tired to argue. He drops all of it on the floor, which is unusual for him.

"Go and get in the shower," he says. "As hot as you can stand it."

"I can do everything myself." My voice comes out wrong. "Get out, Laszlo. I want to be on my own."

"No."

He speaks quietly, without any of the usual edge. Whatever's in his voice, it isn't a command and it isn't a game—it's something I haven't heard from him before, and I don't have the strength to work out what it is.

I'm too tired to fight him properly, so I give up and walk past him into the bathroom. I turn the water as hot as I can tolerate, then get in and stand under it with my hands flat on the tiles and my head down.

It's only then, with the water loud and my face where he can't see it, that a few sobs finally break out of me. It isn't crying, exactly. It's my whole body

letting go of something it's been gripping hard all night.

I hear the shower door open, but I sense he doesn't get in. He stays on the other side of the glass, close enough that I can see the shape of him through the steam, and waits, without saying a word.

"She was nine," I tell him. "The girl. Nine years old. And I did everything right. Every single thing in the right order, and she died on my table anyway with my hands still inside her." I press my forehead against the tile. "So don't tell me I did all I could. The scrub nurse already tried that on me this morning and I wanted to break his jaw."

It takes him a while to reply, which I'm glad he does. Then he says, "Your first was a teen boy."

I lift my head.

"Just under seven years ago. When you were still a resident. You assisted with the surgery." His voice comes through the glass, so calm. I'm a grown woman and a surgeon, and yet I find it soothing. "You lost a boy of nineteen on a December day, a Tuesday I believe, at two in the morning. He'd come off a motorcycle on a wet road, and there was nothing anyone could have done for him. You knew that better than anybody in the building, and it didn't make the slightest difference to you."

My hands come off the tiles. The water is still running over the back of my neck and I've stopped feeling it.

"You came out to your car at two-forty-five," he says. "You got in and didn't start the engine. You put your head on the wheel and cried like there was no one left in the world who could see you."

"How do you know that, Laszlo?" I ask, though I don't know why because I should already know. He was watching me already back then.

"Because I was forty feet away, in the dark, with my lights off." He doesn't soften his voice. "I already knew who you were. I'd seen you once, months before, and I hadn't been able to put you down since. I had a man keeping an eye on you—where you worked, whether you got to your car then home at night in one piece. I told myself that was enough, that I only wanted to know you were safe." He pauses. "That night it wasn't enough. I wanted to

see you with my own eyes, so I sat in that parking garage and watched you come apart. The thing I wanted most in the world was to rush over to you, open your door, and tell you it wasn't your fault. Comfort you."

Another pause.

"Instead, I followed you home to make sure you got there, then left. For so long I held back, telling myself I hadn't earned the right to open that door yet."

I don't want to turn the water off, but my hand reaches out and does it anyway. The bathroom goes quiet except for the water running off me onto the floor that keeps on for a moment.

"That boy came to me," he says. "It wasn't chance. His family happened to use one of my funeral homes, and when his body arrived I sent out the staff who normally do that work, because I wanted to be the one who did it. So I did it myself, all through the night. He'd gone into the road face-first and there was a lot of damage. I rebuilt his face by hand, slowly, until he looked like himself again. I did a better job on that boy than I have done on anyone before. When his mother asked me what she owed, I told her the hospital had already covered the cost, which wasn't true. I covered it. I was one of the men who carried the coffin. And afterward, she stood at the door and held my hand in both of hers and thanked me for giving her the chance to see her son's face one more time."

He pauses, and I take a deep breath, tipping my head back.

"I did that because you cried that night and I couldn't comfort you. It was the one thing I could do for you that you'd never know about. Of course I never told you, and I wasn't going to tell you now. But you're now here thinking you didn't try hard enough, and I can't let you believe that."

I step out of the shower and look up at him. Laszlo is soaked down the right arm of his shirt where he's been leaning against the glass. As I’m dripping wet and shaking, I finally understand why he confessed. He didn't tell me all of this to frighten me, but to make me feel better. This is the kindest thing, making a dead boy beautiful with his bare hands, for me, while I never knew he existed. With those hands, he can do so much more than maim or kill.

I should still be terrified though, and I am. But there's something else I feel that I can’t deny any longer. I can say with complete certainty now that nobody has ever loved me the way this man loves me. It's the wrong kind of love, a kind I never got to see or agree to, but it's so much more than anyone has ever given me, or likely will ever give me. Now that I’m aware of this I can't go back to not knowing it.

He reaches past me, takes the towel off the rail, and wraps it around me, pulling me in against his shirt. I don’t tell him to leave me alone but look up to see the pain that’s so vivid now, on his face. I am hooked.

I give him a small smile. It isn't much, but it's about all I've got left in me.

His face changes when he sees it. The control drops for a little while, and underneath it all he just looks relieved. Relieved and almost unsure, too.

"There you are," he murmurs.

The way he speaks gives me the final blow. For months I have hated him, and that hate has kept me safe. As long as I feel that emotion none of this counts, and when the year is up I can leave and never look back.

Now I go look for that hate, reaching deep within, and can’t find it anywhere. It's gone. What’s left is terrifying. It’s that I now know I care about him. I’m afraid of him and want him at the same time. What can I do with all of this?

In six months, I’ll be able to leave. I can’t make this time count because if I do, I’m finished. God help me, I might already be too far gone. I should hold on, keep my head straight.

I press my face into his shirt and repeat this to myself, again and again, as if doing this will make me believe it. As if this alone will save me from whatever treacherous waters I’m putting myself in.

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# CHAPTER 21

Laszlo

I'm the luckiest man on this fucking planet. Who would have thought that Laszlo Novak would end up married to the most beautiful woman in the city? And not just any woman, but a gifted surgeon, despite being the daughter of one of the men who has likely spent years wishing me dead. Henri Valmont's own girl, his pride, the one thing he guarded closer than his territory—she sleeps under my roof now and wears my name. I took her out from under him, and there was nothing he could do but stand at the wedding and smile. If I were a better man I'd be ashamed of how much I enjoy that. I'm not a better man, and I enjoy it enormously. Mostly because she's worked hard to get out from under his thumb. With me, she'll be cared for. Cherished.

Now here she is, walking toward me in the dress I bought her.

Six months ago, I put a ring on her finger against her will, and she still looks at me most mornings like she's deciding how to end my life. But she's here tonight. I asked and she said yes. She let me choose the dress, and she's crossing this room like she owns it, which she does.

I stand when she reaches the table and pull the chair out for her myself before the waiter beats me to it.

"You look beautiful," I tell her.

"You paid for the dress," she says, sitting down. "I’m just wearing it so don’t get sentimental about it."

That’s my Manon, realist to a fault. God, I want to kiss her. I sit down instead and watch her study the menu.

We've got the best table in the room, my back to the wall, the whole floor in front of me. For a while it's actually nice. She tells me about a resident who fainted mid-surgery, I tell her about my week and leave out the parts that would ruin her appetite. Once she nearly laughs at something I say before she catches herself and hides it behind her wine glass. She'd rather die than laugh at my joke. I count it as a win anyway.

This is all I wanted tonight. One hour when she forgets she's supposed to hate me.

Then a man at the table behind her starts talking, and he doesn’t fucking stop. The table is full, six guys. He's louder than the other five put together, a few glasses of wine past charming. I already know who he is. He isn't difficult to recognize. He’s a property man, plenty of it on the water, richer than Croesus. I’ve seen billboards advertising his company.

"—no, no, she's a hundred and ten feet," he's saying. "Custom. You don't order a boat like that, you commission it. I've got her at Chelsea Piers for the season, best slip on the water, right next to the Meatpacking District with a killer view down toward the Freedom Tower. Ah, it’s great to be on her, better than the duplex penthouse on 57th, I say." He spreads his arms wide. "You should all come out sometime. Bring the wives. I'll have the crew put on the whole show."

One of the others asks him something, happy to keep him going.

"Please. Do you have any idea what a boat like that costs just to run?" He laughs. "If you have to ask, my friend, you can't afford the fuel."

Across from me, Manon rolls her eyes, and I fall for her a little more, which is embarrassing at my age.

"Someone's having a good night," she says.

"Someone always is." I fill her glass back up. "Give him a minute. He'll run out of yacht eventually."

She laughs at that one. She doesn't bother hiding it this time, and my cock goes hard again, damn it. I'm back to being a teenager when I'm around her.

My phone goes off against the table, and I nearly ignore it because there is very little on this earth I want more right now than to keep watching my wife laugh. Then I see the screen.

Bianca.

I answer, because you always answer when Bianca calls. If you don't, she calls again. Then she calls the house. Then she calls Rafe, and before long someone's on a plane to Florence.

"I need you to confirm something with a man called Piero," she says, no hello. There's music behind her. "He doesn't believe you're my brother and what you do. He thinks I made you up because I didn't want to dance with him."

"Bianca."

"So say something brotherly. Threaten him a little. Nothing that'll ruin the night, just enough."

"It's the middle of dinner."

"It's the middle of my night too, and I'm the one being called a liar." A pause. "You bought me a car last month I didn't ask for. You can spare me forty seconds now."

My sister is twenty-three, studies things I don't understand in a city I had to look up to learn more about, and moved four thousand miles from this family on purpose. Through it all, I have never once been able to say no to her. She's the only person alive who talks to me like I'm nothing to be afraid of, and she's right because I'm her brother who is supposed to protect her.

Manon flaps a hand at me, gesturing to me to go ahead and take the call. As she reaches for the bread, I step toward the front of the restaurant to spend a minute terrifying an Italian named Piero on my sister's behalf.

It takes closer to five minutes. Once Bianca has me on the phone she doesn't let go easily. She has a dozen things to tell me over the over loud music, wherever she is, and every time I try to end the call she starts again.

By the time I get back to the table, Manon's chair is empty, but I'm not worried. Her bag's still there, and the waiter tells me she asked for the restroom a few minutes ago, so I sit back down and refill my glass.

When she comes back, I can tell straight away that she's upset. Right now she's pretending everything is fine, and that's the first thing that worries me because Manon is notoriously good at being open and blunt with her anger, her annoyance, or whatever has her panties in a twist. She usually wants me to see exactly how she feels, especially when it's something unpleasant about me.

But when she’s truly upset, it’s different.

She sits down and reaches for her wine. Her hand is shaking. She notices and puts the glass down fast before I can say anything, and then she keeps her eyes on the table. Manon never looks at the table. She looks at me to argue with, to win points. Not now though.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says. "The bathroom flooded. I had to go find someone to deal with it."

"Try again."

"It flooded, Laszlo. Water. On the floor. It happens in buildings."

"I believe the flood. I don't believe it's the reason you can't hold your wine without spilling half of it on the tablecloth." I sit back. "So we can do this the slow way. I'm very patient, I've got all night."

"There's no slow way, because there's nothing to tell you. Tell me, your sister Bianca. She never came to our wedding or the engagement party."

"Then look at me while you say it. She is at university and I didn’t want her distracted. You’ll meet her soon enough. I repeat, look at me while you say it."

She looks away, and I hate that she won't tell me who upset her. She's right to be wary because I already know how I am going to kill the person that did it.

"Here's my problem," I say. "You're the least rattled person I've ever met. I've watched you handle your demanding job on the worst of days and move on to arguing with me about the way the staff won’t let you tidy up the bedroom when you get home, because it’s already done. Few things faze you, including exhaustion. So a flooded bathroom did not do this. Somebody in this room did. And I'm a patient man, but I'm going to need a name before dessert."

"Stop it."

"I can keep going. I've been getting to know you for a long time. Your left hand's been in your lap since you sat down, and you're a surgeon. You don't hide a hand unless you don't want me looking at it. Shall I look at it?"

She puts her hand on the table. It's stopped shaking, but she's pale, and she seems very tense. Either someone threatened to kill a member of her family or she’s getting her period, which can’t be right because I track her cycle.

"You are relentless," she spits out in a low tone.

"I am thorough. I could say it's why you married me." I lean in and drop the joking, because she needs to see I'm not playing. "Manon. Somebody is going to tell me what happened between here and that bathroom, and it can be you, in your own words, or it can be the security footage, the waiter, or whoever else I have to hunt down tonight. You know me. You know I'll get what I want. Save me the trouble, and I promise I'll sit here like a gentleman."

She's quiet for a moment. Then she sets down her glass. "Promise me something first."

"Promise you what."

"That you won't do anything. Not here, tonight, with these people watching." She finally looks at me, and her eyes are hard and steady even though the rest of her isn't. "I mean it, Laszlo. There are many witnesses

here and my name is attached to yours now. Promise me you'll sit in that chair and do absolutely nothing."

"I promise I won't do anything in this room." It's a very specific promise, and she's a very clever woman so she won't push it. The loophole is inevitable.

She glances over at the man with the yacht, who's back at his table now, snapping his fingers at the waiter and loudly ordering a bottle of something expensive.

"He was waiting for me when I came out of the bathroom," she says. "I said excuse me, and he stepped in front of me and wouldn't move, just smirked at me. Then he put his hand flat on the wall so I couldn't get past."

She turns her glass a quarter-turn on the table and keeps her eyes on it. My blood pressure is surely climbing and she hasn't even gotten to the worst of it.

"He put his hand on the back of my neck." She stops to take a breath, and in my pocket my fingers find the knife I keep there just because. The blade eases open under my thumb. "He squeezed hard and held it so I couldn't turn my head. Then he leaned right in against my ear and said—"

She swallows. For a second I don't think she's going to get it out, and part of me hopes she won't because I can already feel what it's going to do to me.

"He said, 'I know whose woman you are, and I know he's paying for it because a filthy whore like you doesn't end up on Novak's arm for free. But I'll double whatever he gives you. I want you under my table with my cock in your mouth while he sits there and watches. And you'll do it, or I'll find you on your own some night and open your throat for making me wait.'"

She says it all in one flat breath, staring at the tablecloth, and when she's finished she swallows hard. She looks faintly sick, like she can't believe those words just came out of her own mouth at a dinner table. I'm impressed at her memory of every word he said. But a threat like that is worth remembering, isn't it?

"That's what he said," she says quietly. "Word for word. I have a good memory. Lucky me." There she goes, echoing my thoughts.

I take a slow drink of my wine.

On the outside I make sure I look like a man enjoying his dinner. But in my head I'm fantasizing about cutting off the hand that touched the back of my wife's neck, and then his throat, since he's so keen on throats. He offered to open hers, so the least I can do is return the favor. I'm counting the four steps between me and his table, working out that I could be finished before his wineglass hits the floor.

The only thing keeping me in this seat is that I gave her my word, and I've been trying to be a man who keeps his word to her, which is frankly the worst possible night for that principle to kick in. Because I want to stand up, walk to his table, and put his face through it until it comes out the other side like something fed through a meat grinder. I want this more than I've wanted anything ever. I'm sitting here with a switchblade in my pocket, smiling at my wife, eating a very expensive dinner I can no longer taste. I’m being good. Being so fucking good for not reacting.

And here's the part I'm grateful for. This idiot spent twenty solid minutes earlier telling his dinner companions precisely where he keeps his boat. He drew me a map to the thing he loves most in the world without my asking a single question. Some men you have to work for. This one gift-wrapped himself.

All my adult life I have managed not to want to kill anyone over dinner. Six months married to this woman and it's a weekly event. I've buried men who did less to my blood pressure than she does sitting there eating bread and speaking words.

"Say something," she says. "You've gone quiet. You're never quiet. It's frightening."

"I'm being calm," I tell her. "You asked me to be calm, so I'm being calm. This is what it looks like. I don't recommend it, it's agony, but you'll notice I'm doing it."

"Laszlo."

"I'm having my dinner like a normal husband whose wife has had a perfectly normal evening." I put a forkful of something in my mouth, chew

and swallow, and I couldn't tell you what it was if you held a gun to me. Seems I've lost the ability to taste anything over the sound of my own pulse. "See? Relaxed. I'm so relaxed I might fall asleep in this…" I look down at my plate. "In the risotto."

That gets the smallest breath of a laugh out of her, which is all I wanted, and I'm about to press my luck when a shadow falls across the table.

"Laszlo."

Constantine, my brother, and of all the nights to run into me, he picks this one.

He's got a woman with him, which is enough to make me look twice, because Constantine hasn't brought a woman anywhere in years. No place decent people frequent, anyway. For the longest, Aunt Rosaria has been telling the family he'll die alone, and he's made it his life's mission to prove her right out of spite. Yet here he is with his hand at the small of someone's back, looking like he'd rather be somewhere else, which is how Constantine looks most of the time.

"Brother." I stand and shake hands with him.

He tips his head an inch toward the woman. "Larissa."

"Larissa." I take her hand. "You have my sympathies. He's my brother and I still don't enjoy him."

She smiles. Beside me, Manon has already put on the bright, easy face she wears for strangers. Standing, she greets Larissa, and the two of them start a conversation. Constantine pulls out the chair at my side and sits without being asked.

"Be my guest I suppose," I say with a sigh. The women follow suit.

Now there are two more people I'd like to kill. Or maybe just my baby brother. I'd settle for mere strangling in his case.

He looks at me, then at my place setting, where my fork is lying crooked across the plate, half off the edge. He knows exactly what that means because I'm the type to go to someone's house and straighten their

paintings or reposition decorative items on surfaces. My fork looks like any other fork and like any normal person would leave it on a plate. But he is fully aware that’s not like me at all.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks, but it’s not really a question.

"Nothing."

He stares at that damn fork again but says nothing else. He knows I’ll spill the beans when I’m good and ready.

And I am.

"Not so she hears it," I say, keeping my voice under the women's conversation. Manon is turned to Larissa, laughing at something, oblivious. Good.

He nods and waits.

"The big one behind her," I say, quieter still. "He followed her to the bathroom, put his hand on her, and told her to go and suck his dick or he'd find her and kill her."

Constantine doesn't turn to see. He takes a slow drink.

"And … she's made you promise not to touch him," he says.

"I promised her I won’t do anything here, especially not in front of these people." I straighten the fork at last, line it up perfectly with the plate, and it helps about as much as you'd expect. "Yes."

I put my elbow on the table and inch closer to him. The women are fully engaged in their conversation about handling muscle pain after workouts. Quietly, I tell him what I want. It’s pretty straightforward. Constantine listens, blank-faced, and when I sit back he gives me a tiny nod.

Across the table, Manon’s gaze flicks to me. I pick up my glass and smile at her, certain that I’m looking every inch the gentleman.

Constantine gets to his feet and rests his hand on Larissa's shoulder. I must say that in this very moment, he’s almost looking like pleasant company.

"Manon," he says, inclining his head. "A pleasure. Truly. You're wasted on him."

"So everyone keeps telling me," she says.

"Larissa, my sympathies," I tell the woman as I stand and take her hand. "Call me if he becomes unbearable. I keep references."

They leave, Constantine steering Larissa away with his hand at her back.

Behind Manon, the loud son of a bitch's table is breaking up, too. I watch over her shoulder without letting my gaze land on him. He drops his card on the table when he stands, and they're all in the warm, delighted state of men who've had a good night and expect the world to keep arranging itself for their pleasure. He walks out without so much as glancing at my wife. He's already forgotten she exists.

"Do you want to go?" Manon asks.

"Not yet. Stay and have another drink. You've had an unpleasant evening and you've earned it. Besides, I like sitting here with you."

I order another bottle of the red she likes, and then dessert. Slowly, the stiffness leaves her shoulders. Soon she's telling me a genuinely vicious story about a consultant she can't stand, and I'm laughing because it's so real. The way she relates it is pure Manon. The restaurant empties around us while somewhere away from here, my brother makes a phone call. I don't spare it another thought, because I trust things are being handled.

When she's finished her wine, we go out to the car. It's nice and peaceful, and she's relaxed and drowsy from the drink, her head tipped back against the seat, her shoes already off. I tell Daniel to take the long way home, down along the water. Manon doesn’t question that. She watches the city slide past the window with her hand in mine on the seat between us, and I'd happily live inside this moment for as long as possible.

We come around the bend where the road runs closest to the marina, where the yachts sit lit up in a long white row against the black water, and that's when one of them explodes.

I hear it before I see it fully—a low, heavy thud in my chest as the car rattles. Then the whole vessel lifts out of the water and opens into a ball of orange fire, rolling up into the night and throwing burning pieces of itself sideways across the dark. The flames are enormous. They light up the surface of the harbor and the hulls of every boat around it. The glow pours straight through the windows and fills the inside of the car, including Manon's face. She sits bolt upright, wide awake now, staring through the glass with the fire moving in her eyes.

"Oh my God." She's got one hand on the door. "Laszlo, look. One of the boats just went up. The whole thing. Did you see that?"

"Hard to miss..."

"There must be people down there. Should we stop?" She's craning back toward it as we pass, the surgeon in her already awake, reaching for a problem to fix. "God, that was huge. Could have been the fuel, a gas line, something. We should call 911!"

As she speaks, a few people are rushing toward the scene. They’re in uniform but can’t make out what.

"You see, it’s all taken care of. The harbor has security," I say. "It's not your shift."

She watches the sight shrink in the back window, frowning, and I follow her gaze until the bend takes it out of sight. Then she settles slowly back into the seat, wide-eyed, still a little drunk, shaking her head.

"Someone's having an unlucky night," she says.

"Very unlucky indeed," I agree. I take her hand back into mine on the seat between us, and look out at the scenery while my wife has no idea that she just watched me keep a promise.

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# CHAPTER 22

Manon

I open my eyes. My throat feels dry and my head hurts. I can't remember much from last night. The room is too bright. Somebody has opened the blackout curtain, and it wasn't me. I can only think Dolores because Laszlo gets up early, before dawn. He's a freak of nature.

I reach for my phone on the nightstand. It's nine-forty-five, which is late for me. My shift doesn't start till one, but I want to be in early so I could catch up with Daphne.

I try to remember last night but my brain won’t cooperate. We were at this high-end restaurant that you can apparently never get a table at. This has never been an issue for my husband. No one ever says no to Laszlo Novak. It was the first night out I'd actually agreed to since the wedding. He insisted, and I said yes because something shifted after that time we spoke through the shower glass in our bathroom.

I sit up carefully, telling myself I'm never drinking again, not when I have a twelve-hour shift ahead of me.

Moments later, the door opens and Laszlo walks in. He's already dressed, and my heart skips a beat because that man looks so good. Heat moves down to the pit of my stomach and my nipples stand at attention. Damn it. I'm not attracted to him, to this perfect species of a human with a perfect

muscular body, even better hair, and a chiseled jaw. A man who stalked me for years yet treats me like a queen…

His dark shirt opens at the collar, and I'm nearly undone. All I can think of is him inside me. And that one time he was, I really hate to think about it because he'd just killed a man. A man I was attached to for four years.

Christ, I really need … touch. I need to get laid. I can't go on like this—the sooner this whole contract between us expires, the better. We are married on paper, and I have resisted developing any feelings for him, even though he's proved to me time and again that he cares about me.

He's carrying a glass of water and two tablets on a small plate. Setting them down on the nightstand, he looks at me with mild concern. There is admiration in his gaze, too, but I pretend I don't see it.

"Ibuprofen," he says. "And something for nausea, if you need it."

"What happened last night? I don't remember much."

"You had a very good time." He sits down on the edge of the bed, not close enough to crowd me. "Constantine turned up with a woman, and the two of you talked for most of the evening. Constantine doesn't really date like a normal guy. He fucks women, that's it."

"I didn't think it was a date. She told me he'd been cold to her all week."

"He's been cold to everyone all week. But usually it's a wham-bam thing with him."

I shrug. "She seemed to think it was personal."

"With Constantine it never is. That's the problem."

"You sang in the car on the way home."

"That doesn't sound like me," he says with a smirk.

I take the tablets and drink the water. When I'm done, he refills the glass from a jug that's already there. Then he leans down to kiss me, and I put my hand up between us, flat on his chest. The smell of his cologne envelops my

senses, and for one split second I want to grab his tie and push his head down between my legs. Naughty, filthy brain—this is not happening.

"What are you doing?" I ask, pretending I'm not suddenly hot for him because he looks like a god right now.

"Good morning," he says, moving back, but his blue gaze is wrecking me. I cannot want him. I don't want to have sex with him. I don't want his fat, giant cock in my pussy.

"Don't."

"I thought we had a good time last night."

"If you say so." God, why am I such a bitch?

He looks at me for a moment, and I can see him working out what to do with the fact that I'm not being nice to him this morning. Then he sits up straight and his face goes back to the neutral, professional one he wears as the respectable undertaker. Just like that, the moment is gone.

"I've got a call at ten," he says. "And people from Chicago at eleven."

"Have a lovely day."

"Try to eat something."

"Get out."

He frowns, but only slightly. His face smooths in a blink. "You slept in here," he says, like it settles something. "This is our room now."

"Get out."

He gives me a small smile then leaves, closing the door quietly behind him. I'm a doctor, for Christ's sake, a pretty experienced surgeon, and I can't even bring myself to be intimate with my husband, because being angry at him is the last thing keeping me on my side of the line. Pulling the thought of him out of my mind, I get ready.

I spend the entire drive to the hospital thinking about him. About the way he looked at me when he handed me those tablets, so caring and thoughtful. About the fact that I nearly let him kiss me, and I would have let him do a

lot more than that. I don't want to feel this way. I need to talk to Daphne about it because in truth she is my only friend now, a new but honest friend, and I am not a person who’s had those kinds of friendships in my life. Not with the family I was born in. I isolated myself for the most of it. How could I bring anybody into that?

But Daphne is a woman who’s been through things and knows what she is talking about. She does not judge, but will tell it to you like it is. It’s not like I had a choice about connecting with her. She’s a whirlwind that swept me right up.

So now I need somebody to tell me that I am not losing my mind over a man I did not choose. I know she’s been telling me to let loose and live a little, but I’m just about going insane over this.

I stop at the coffee cart on the ground floor and get Daphne the horrible one she likes—oat milk, three heaping teaspoons of instant, one sugar, a lot of cinnamon on top—and I get myself plain drip coffee because my stomach is not ready for anything more ambitious than that. Then I take the lift down to the basement.

I push the door open with my hip.

"I brought your terrible cinnamon nightmare and before you say anything, I need to talk to you about something. It is embarrassing, so you have to promise not to judge me."

Then I stop, because there is a body on the table.

Daphne looks up from her desk. "Oh, thank God. You are my favorite person in the whole world. I have been here since three o'clock this morning and I am running on absolutely nothing."

"Why have you been here since three o'clock?"

"This was an emergency post-mortem. The police wanted it done as quickly as possible because there is a lot of press attention on it, so they dragged me out of bed at two-fifteen, and I have been down here ever since." She takes the coffee out of my hand and drinks, eyes closed as though I’ve given her ambrosia. "God, that is exactly what I needed. I was going to move him before you came down, but you're a little early, aren't you?"

"Yes, because I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Then talk to me, girl. I am listening. I am just going to keep working while you do, if that is all right with you."

I put my bag down on the chair and walk over to the table. He is a big man, taller than average and broad across the shoulders. He is burned very badly across the chest and both arms, as well as down the left side of his face. His left hand, which is resting on the edge of the tray, is more or less intact. Something about him seems familiar, but I cannot quite place it, so I push the thought away because I am hungover and not back to myself yet.

"Who is he?"

"They are still working on the official identification. They are waiting on the dental records, but they are fairly sure they know who he is. He was on a luxury yacht down at Chelsea Piers Marina last night, and the whole thing exploded at around one o'clock this morning. It was quite a big fire, I was told. You could see that shit from the coast road. He was the only person on board. They pulled him out of the water."

My heart skips a beat. "A yacht exploded."

"Yeah, out of this world. It just exploded out of nowhere. They think it could possibly be a gas leak in the galley, but the insurance people will be crawling over the wreckage for a while before we know anything for sure."

I look at the body again, more properly. His penis has been cut off cleanly at the base. There is very little tissue left, just a flat wound where it should be, and the edges of the cut are neat and straight, which means whoever did it used something sharp and knew what they were doing. There is not much blood around the wound either, which is unusual.

"Daphne."

"Mm?"

"His penis has been cut off."

"Yes."

"Before he died."

"Yes."

"With what?"

"Something very sharp. It was done before the fire, but not very long before because there is a lot less bleeding than there should be, which means his heart was not beating for much longer after it was done." She looks up briefly and pulls a face. "I know. Poor man. Somebody had a very particular sort of grievance against him. I have no idea how it fits with an accidental explosion on a yacht, but that is the police's problem to work out, not mine. My job is just to write down what I see."

I look at his left hand again. There is a heavy silver signet ring on the third finger. And I know exactly where I have seen that ring before—when he grabbed me by the neck last night.

The loud man at the table behind ours, who loved to brag. He followed me to the bathroom and blocked my way when I came out, then proceeded to make some pretty lurid threats. When Laszlo pushed and pushed until I told him, he promised he would not do anything to the man in that room.

*In that room.*

I take a step back from the table.

"Daphne, I am so sorry. I have to go."

"You have only just got here."

"I know, but I have just remembered there is something I really do need to sort out before my shift starts. I will come back down after and we can talk properly, I promise."

"You said you wanted to talk to me about something."

"It is going to have to wait. See you later, okay?"

I walk out, get in the lift, then straight to my car and the train station to get to the Midtown address where I know he’s having his meetings this morning, because he told me by text. He tells me, even when I don’t ask. And when he doesn’t tell me, I ask Denis. Since I got married, my father sent him to watch over me, and now he gets to know where we both are at

any given time. His loyalty, though, is still to me, and it seems Laszlo is fine with that. Denis is always in a position to keep an eye on my husband for me.

My husband, Laszlo Novak. I want to be face to face with him right now. He really should not have tortured that prick, and I want to look him in the eye and tell him that. But at the same time, I can't get my head around how he did it when he was with me the entire evening in the restaurant, and then later on in the car when the yacht exploded. Some awful animalistic part of me that I do not want to acknowledge is very awake this morning. It likes what he did and wants to know exactly how he did it. I am going to have to ignore that part of me completely while I unleash my fury on him.

The receptionist at the Spotlight building, a pretty woman with curly blonde hair, sees me as I walk out of the lift. Her nametag reads Renata. I introduce myself.

"Mrs. Novak, Mr. Novak is in a very important meeting and has asked not to be disturbed," she says, already standing up as I walk past her.

"I don't care. I am going in there whether you like it or not," I tell her. “I know where he is on this floor.” I reach a set of double doors and push them open.

"Mrs. Novak, please—"

"It is all right, Renata. Let her through and close the door behind you."

Every single face at the table turns to look at me, and I do not care in the slightest. No fucks to give for eternity—that’s how it feels. Denis looks properly shocked. Février though, old fox that he is, takes it all in stride. He’s got his cane and his tobacco, that’s all that matters. I give him my sweetest smile. He nods back at me. Guess my father now is comfortably in bed with the enemy.

Both of them know no woman has ever walked into one of my father’s meetings uninvited in the past. This little gathering here has the same charge. I should know; I eavesdropped on plenty of them as a teenager. A bunch of men talking about other men's dicks and who has the larger one. Short of whipping their junk out and measuring it, they did all the peacock-

style posturing that males do when found in groups in the wild, all interspersed with bouts of serious business talk.

Now, speaking of dicks and penises…

The biggest one of all—in every possible sense—is sitting at the far end of the table. Laszlo sets his pen down on his notepad and leans back in his chair.

"Manon. Darling."

"Sorry to interrupt, everybody. Could I have a minute with my husband, please?"

Nobody dares to move. Everyone stares at me, then at my husband. Are they all scared to say anything? The Chicago people look like deers in headlights.

"Darling." His voice is quite pleasant. "You can see we are in the middle of something. Perhaps this can wait until evening. I know you have a shift starting shortly."

"It really cannot wait, no."

"Manon."

"Laszlo." How long are we going to play ping-pong with names?

"These gentlemen are only here for the day, my love. Give me thirty minutes and I will come and find you."

"No." Did I hear a gasp somewhere? Nah. Maybe it’s my imagination.

"No?"

Idiot. "No."

I walk to the table and sit down in the empty chair opposite Laszlo, at the other end, putting my bag on the floor. Bending down, I take my sensible hospital sneakers and socks off, one at a time, then put my bare feet up on the polished edge of his very expensive and shiny walnut table, crossing them and leaning back in the chair.

Ahhhh, feels good to stretch my toes a bit, even though I haven’t started my shift yet. I wiggle them and sigh. "I am going to sit here until you are finished, then. Everybody, please, carry on."

"Take your feet off the table, Manon."

"I will take my feet off the table when everybody else has left the room."

He says nothing, but I can see the steam starting to come out of his ears. Showtime. "Manon," he says at last, a word that seems to be torn from his lips at the maximum pain threshold.

Fucking hell, I’m tired of this back and forth.

"Have you got anything you want to say to me about last night, Laszlo?” I throw out into the ether. “About the marina, for instance. Or about the body with no penis that is currently being fiddled with at the morgue, no pun intended." I look at the others with a bashful expression. “No worries, it’s not *really* the kind of fiddling you’re thinking of. It’s just a bit of dark morgue humor. My husband gets it, don’t you, darling?” My eyes drift back to the man in question.

It seems that all of a sudden everyone has stopped breathing, and someone to my right clears his throat. Then the awkward silence continues. I glance at Rafe, who is staring at Laszlo, and next to him there is a young Tomek. I bet the two of them had something to do with removing that man's penis, although I could be wrong. There are a lot of men on his payroll that I don't know about or have never seen personally, so anyone could have been on that yacht before it went kaboom.

Denis seems lost. I don't think he or any of my father's men know what Laszlo's men were up to last night.

My husband stands up.

"Gentlemen. My apologies. My wife and I are going to need the room. Rafe will take you across the corridor to the small conference room, and I will rejoin you in fifteen minutes."

About a dozen people gather their papers and laptops in absolute silence, then they all leave. Denis touches my shoulder as he goes past me but says

nothing. The door closes behind the last of them.

We are alone.

Except this room shares one wall with the room they have all just gone into, and I do not think that wall is anywhere near as thick as it needs to be because I can hear the hum of their voices through it. I do not care because I’m not the one who is responsible for cutting anyone’s pecker off. On the contrary, I’m usually the one who’d sew that shit back on.

Laszlo does not sit back down. He walks the length of the boardroom and stops in front of my chair. He stares at my feet.

"Take your feet off my table, Manon."

"No."

"Now."

I do what he says because I want to look him in the eye when he tells me exactly how he killed that asshole from last night. I want to know every detail.

"Why did you do it? Why did you have to cut off his fucking dick?" I demand, and Laszlo leans in closer so his lips brush my ear.

I start to shiver, a reflex response. I hate myself for it, the fact my body is suddenly lighting up to him saying the most deprived and violent things, especially when he starts talking about killing someone.

"He touched what was mine, Manon, and no one should ever dare to lay a finger on my wife. Did you really think that I would let him be after the way he spoke to you? Violated you? He fucked with the wrong man. He squealed like a pig, *ma macabre*, when Rafe was cutting his dick off. He pissed himself and he was begging like the fucking coward he was," Laszlo says, and my nipples harden. My heart is racing, too.

"How do you know what he did if you weren't there?" I ask. My palms have gone damp, and there is a heat low in my stomach that I have no business feeling right now, in this particular situation.

Laszlo moves away from my ear and studies me properly, with a triumphant look that makes him even more handsome than he already is. God help me, I want to climb into his lap and let him ruin me in the filthiest ways.

"Because I had it recorded," he says. "I asked one of my men to record it for me. Rafe took his time first. They had him tied down to a chair on the deck, and they went at him slowly, because I told them to. He was bleeding for a long while and still squealing, still pleading, still promising them anything he could think of. Money. Names. His mother... But he had no idea this was about you, about how he dared to think that you would be a whore." Laszlo's voice does not change at all. "He was still begging when they set the charges under the hull."

I have stopped breathing.

He looks up at my face, then lifts one hand and runs it slowly over my cheek, down the side of my throat, and lower between my breasts. I do not stop him. I do not do anything at all.

"I know you like this," he says quietly. "So I will tell you a little bit more."

"Stop." The word comes out with almost no air behind it. "Stop talking. I don't want to hear any more."

"No, *ma macabre*, you love it. Talking about this makes you wet." He tilts his head. "I know how much this turns you on, Manon. Look at you."

"No. Stop. Don't." My voice breaks.

He cocks his head to the side, eyes narrowed on me.

"You are lying to me," he says gently, and his eyes drop to my throat, my chest, lower. "Your breathing has changed. Your color has changed. I know what a body is doing. It is my whole life. And I am telling you that your body is not disgusted." He leans in another inch. "You are going to hate yourself for this later, and you are going to blame it on being angry."

I hit his chest and he laughs. That sexual, sinful sound does something to my insides. It’s been months not counting the bathroom incident since we had sex and I had to get myself off several times with my pink dildo, but

that orgasm was incomparable to when I climaxed with his dick inside me. Him touching me. Looking into my eyes. Feeling me. Kissing me…

Oh God, oh God, oh God…

I want that. I want him to pull my hair and fuck me until I can’t walk. Damn it.

"Tell me," I hear myself say. "Tell me the rest of it. And don't stop talking." How I’ve changed my tune in an instant…

"You know what happens if I do." His voice has dropped. "It will be exactly like it was with Charles. You remember how that was."

"I don't care." I have his tie in my fist. I do not remember taking hold of it. "I don't care, Laszlo."

And I pull him down to my mouth.

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# CHAPTER 23

Laszlo

Her lips taste like pure fucking sin and I can't get enough of her. *Ma macabre* likes it when I tell her how slowly I can kill a man who dares even to look at her wrong. I grab the back of her head and pull her harder against me, and that little moan she makes, like a whimper, gets my cock so hard it could burst. I devour her, fisting her hair then roughly discarding her shirt because I want my hands on those round, full, perky breasts that deserve to be framed and studied. This is all I want. All I think of…

My original plan was to arrange a rendezvous and fuck her senseless on our burial plot, but things got in the way, then time rushed by and it never happened. It's not that I didn't try—I fucking tried—but Manon was still treating this marriage as a contractual obligation. She has refused to touch me, punishing me for the fact I did not tell her about the years I've known about her.

And she still doesn't know the half of it.

But now, in this moment, everything has changed. All bets are off. One exploding yacht and the gruesome details of a dismemberment, and my wife is desperate for my cock. Other men buy jewelry or flowers. I've been speaking the wrong love language for six months.

There's a room full of people on the other side of that wall. People who are about to learn things about my marriage that aren't on the agenda. I don't

care. Better yet, neither does she.

I get rid of her bra and toss it to the floor. My mouth finds her nipple while my hand works its way down between her thighs. Whoever said men can't multitask? I chuckle at my own joke.

I lick her breast and she arches into me, sliding to the very edge of the table, nails in my scalp, and when I bite down she gasps. She’s still behaving. That won't last. I intend to make sure of it.

My mouth needs to be on her pussy. I need to suck on that little bundle of nerves until she's screaming my name, so our witnesses hear how much Mrs. Novak enjoys being fucked by her husband. God knows I need to hear it too. That's the plan. Then her legs over my shoulders… I shove her skirt up her thighs when her hand closes in my hair and pulls my head back up.

"No."

I stop and glance at her. Nobody tells me no in this room. Men have signed away entire shipping routes here when they owed me big and got on my bad side, specifically to avoid telling me no. My wife says it to me twice a day, unprompted, for free.

"No?"

"I want to suck your cock." And down she goes, right there on the carpet where the lawyer was sitting minutes ago. A thousand dollars an hour, that man, and he's never once made me forget every language I speak, including the one I use to threaten people in.

All those years of fantasizing brought me nothing close to the reality of her. Because the real thing is the formidable Manon Novak on her knees, pulling my belt free like she's disarming me, which, to be honest, she is.

She takes me out and holds me in her fist, hunger and disbelief fighting for space on her face. Hard and heavy in her hand, my cock is close enough to her mouth that I can feel her breath on it.

Her eyes catch a fresh cut on my hand. I caught it with the razor and didn’t take care of it right away as I was pressed for time. Her breath changes, and it isn't fear. She drags her thumb over the tiny wound like she's checking

whether it's real. "You've hurt—" She stops, then pivots. "I've been thinking about this cock all morning." She drags her fist up the length of me, slowly, like she's got all day. "Through my entire shower.

"I want you to fuck my throat until my eyes water, and I want you to watch me take it."

This woman is getting bolder by the day. I'm not sure if it's what happened, or the fact that she's denied us so much playtime with her manufactured meanness toward me. Either way, she definitely doesn't sound like the saint she plays for everyone else. But I've seen underneath all that once already, on a garage floor next to a dead man. Whatever this is, it isn't new. She's just not fighting it as hard.

Saint Manon the Gruesome… Manon *la macabre*…

I half-chuckle at that, then say, "Manon." I mean it to come out as a warning, but it sounds more like a prayer. Fantastic. Years of being the most feared man among the syndicates in this city, undone by my own wife before she's even put her mouth on me. "Careful. I had plans for you, and they all required lasting longer than nine seconds."

Then she licks me from root to crown, slowly, eyes open, and I stop breathing.

Her mouth swallows me and it's over. My composure, my plans, my reputation, all of it lost into the wet heat of her. She takes me to the back of her throat and my hips buckle. I groan loudly, enough to be heard across the entire building, and I couldn't care less. I've yearned for this, and now that I have it I'm hanging on by my fingernails, one hand fisted in her hair, thighs shaking, so close so fast it's humiliating.

"You need to stop." She doesn't stop. "Manon. *Ma macabre*. I will pay you to stop."

She laughs around my cock. The vibration nearly finishes me on the spot. I want to impress my wife with how long I can last, but if she doesn't quit this in the next few seconds, the whole image falls to pieces.

"Look at you," I rasp. "One garage floor and then six months of locked doors, *ma macabre*. Six months of you pretending you didn't want this. And

now you're on your knees in my boardroom with your mouth full of my cock and a room full of people next door. You couldn't even wait for a bed."

She hums around me. That's her answer. The vibration goes up my spine like a struck bell.

I wrap her hair twice around my hand. I won't fuck her face, not now; I'm already on the edge, but I let her set the pace. Slow. Deep.

"You wanted details earlier on," I manage to rasp, watching her lips stretch around me, watching her wet lashes lift so she can look at me while she takes it all the way to the back of her throat. Fuck. I'm sweating through my shirt with the sheer effort, praying to God to let me last. "Barged into my meeting demanding to know how I did it. Rude of you, by the way."

She pulls off with a dirty wet sound, fist still working me, and looks up with those wrecked, glassy eyes.

"Then give me the details." Her thumb drags over the head of me and I twitch in her hand. "Tell me what you were going to do to him. The yacht man. Everything you had planned and didn't do because you wouldn't leave my side. And don't you dare leave anything out."

Then she puts my cock back in her mouth.

So my wife wants a bedtime story. God, I have never loved anyone the way I love this deranged woman.

"You made me promise to sit there and do nothing, in the restaurant." My fist tightens in her hair. "So I did. And while you drank your wine, I put the plan together. I wrote it down, the whole thing."

A whimper.

“You never noticed, I know. I’m good at discretion.”

She moans around me and I nearly white out.

"The hand was first, the one he put on your neck. Not off. Off is fast, and I wasn't in a hurry. There are twenty-seven bones in the human hand, *ma macabre,* and I wanted every one of them introduced to him. Slowly." Her tongue does something illegal and I get a bit distracted. "Then his tongue.

He was so proud of it. Then his throat—he liked throats, remember? He offered to open yours. That debt needed settling."

Her free hand slides between her thighs. My wife is touching herself to *this*. Fucking hell, I nearly go blind.

"And the yacht." I drag her mouth down my cock, hold her there—one, two, three—and let her up, gasping. "He told the whole restaurant where he kept it. Practically drew me a map."

"God." Her voice is ruined. Her hand is moving faster. "And then?"

"And then nothing. I'd promised my wife a quiet evening." I tip her chin up with one finger, my cock resting against her cheek, obscene and glistening. "So I gave the whole design to Constantine at the table, and explained in detail how to do every cut, the pace, etcetera… and I smiled at you the entire time. Rafe and Tomek did the work quite adequately. I've seen the photographs." My jaw tightens. "It wasn't craftsmanship. You cost that man a work of art, *ma macabre*, and you cost me a very relaxing night." I pull her up off her knees by the hair, and she comes up flushed and swaying, mouth swollen, eyes black. "And now you're going to settle the bill."

"How much do I owe?"

"Everything. Clothes off, all of it. Then bend down over my table and spread those perfect legs and ass for me."

She holds my eyes while she strips, because she's who she is—even obeying me has to look like her idea. The pants drop. The underwear follows. She stands naked in the middle of the boardroom, flushed down to her tits, lips still swollen from my cock, and she's smirking at me.

Then she bends down over the table as I say, her torso right next to where her bare feet were just a while ago. Elbows on table, back arched, thighs apart, pussy wet and swollen and on display, looking back at me over her shoulder like she's daring me to take her slow. Not going to happen—I nearly come untouched, like a fifteen-year-old.

She starts to slip her hand underneath her body to reach between her legs.

"No." I catch her wrist and pin it to the small of her back. "That's mine to feast on. No more touching yourself without my permission."

"I can't wait, Laszlo. I want you. Fuck me now."

"Not yet, *ma macabre*." I drag my palm down her spine, slow, and feel her shake under it. "The last time I had my mouth on you, I stopped five times and left you shaking in your parents' bathroom. You'd earned it—you broke into my mortuary, vanished for a day, and made me think you were dead." I press a kiss to the base of her spine and she whimpers.

"You said—" she's panting, forehead against the wood, "—you said the next time I came, it would be on the plot. Saint-Améline."

Of course she remembers. She remembers everything, my terrible wife. She thinks she's one-upped me.

"I know what I said." I pull her hips a little off the edge of the table and push her legs wider. "Consider the contract amended. Saint-Améline still gets its turn. That promise doesn't expire. But today, you come where every man on this floor can hear exactly who does it to you."

I crouch down on one knee as if about to ask her pussy to marry me again, then spread her ass cheeks and bury my face between her legs from behind.

The sound that tears out of her isn't a gasp. It's a moan so loud she slaps her hand over her mouth. She's soaked, juices dripping down her thighs from sucking my cock and hearing about a horrible death. I lick her open in one long stroke, slow and flat, and her knees nearly go out. I grip her thighs apart and hold her exactly where I want her, proceeding to eat my wife like the starving man I have been for years. Tongue inside her. Two fingers inside her, curling, while I suck and lick on her. She's writhing, trying to close her legs around my head, trying to ride my face and get away from it at the same time, but I allow neither.

"Laszlo … oh God! They'll hear everything…"

I lift my mouth just enough to answer. "Good. Scream. I want every man on this floor to know what I'm doing to you. I want them to fly home and tell people what they heard." I slap her clit lightly and she jolts like a live wire.

"Now stop being polite and come on my tongue. You owe me this and I am done waiting."

I swivel my body and pull her away from the table, then slide my head between her legs and force her to sit on my face. I seal my mouth over her clit and suck hard, fingers driving into her, and I know the exact moment she breaks. Her thighs clamp around my head and she pours over my tongue, screaming. She comes so beautifully, pulling at my hair, my name on her lips. My wife is loud; the moans and screams go on and on, and to anyone outside this room she must sound like she's being tortured. That sound is going to be engraved on my mind forever. I don't stop, not even when her thighs are shaking and she's begging me to. It's a very good orgasm, and I'm proud of myself. I work her through every last shudder, drunk on the taste I can’t get enough of.

She's still shaking as I come up for air while holding her up on her feet. Her upper body goes limp against the wood. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I stand and position her in front of me. I line my bare cock up against her perfect, dripping pussy. She's still panting, but I need to be inside her.

"Nothing between us." I drag the head inside her, coating myself in her orgasm. "Never with you. I want you dripping for me for the rest of the day. Tell me you understand."

"Yes… Laszlo, please…"

"My wife. Begging. I like it." I grab her hair. "I was beginning to think it was a lost cause."

And I push into her in one long, brutal stroke.

She's scalding and swollen and still fluttering from her orgasm, but takes all of me with a sound that goes straight through the wall. I don't give her even a moment to adjust. Pulling her head back by the hair, I fuck her the way I've wanted to since she walked into my life demanding her idiot brother back—passionately, deeply, viciously. Her chest slides against the table with every stroke. There's nothing vanilla left in me; there never was. Manon was never going to want it gentle, and God knows we should have started doing this months ago.

"You want to know what you feel like?" I bend over her back, mouth at her ear, hips never slowing. "You grip me the way a man grips a blade when it goes in. Desperate. Like your body knows exactly what I am and wants it deeper anyway." She moans, clenching hard around me, and I laugh, breathless, hers. "There it is. My little *wiedźmo*. You get tighter every time I say something that should send you running."

"More," she gasps. "Tell me more."

"I got blood out of this shirt cuff last month," I tell her, driving in harder, "and my first thought was that the stain was the exact color of your mouth." Another stroke. And another. Her nails scratch the walnut. A folder drops to the carpet. "When you barged into my meeting demanding to know more about a murder, in front of my captains… Manon, I have never wanted anyone the way I wanted you in that moment. You are the single most frightening thing I have ever let into my life. And you're mine."

"Yours … hmmmm harder…"

I give it to her exactly as she wants it, hard and fast. I give her everything, seven years of it, hauling her back onto me by the hair while my other hand reaches around and finds her clit. She's screaming again; this time probably the whole street can hear her, and I hope they're taking notes.

"Again," I order, rubbing her clit in tight, merciless circles. "Come on my cock this time. Milk me, *ma macabre*, and I'll give you everything I've got —every drop, deep inside you, where it belongs. That's an order."

And for once in her contrary, magnificent life, Manon Novak does exactly as she's told.

She clamps down on me so hard I see stars, a white glow screaming my name, and it rips my own finish out of me like that blade finally coming loose. I bury myself inside her and come, flooding her, sinking my teeth into her shoulder, growling something into her skin that might be her name or a threat or both.

We collapse flat on the table, my chest to her back, both of us drained, her heart slamming through her ribs against mine.

Then, next door, very faintly, somebody clears his throat and suggests they take a short break.

Manon starts to laugh underneath me. Silent at first, then not.

"You told them fifteen minutes," she says.

I lift my head and look at the watch on my wrist beside her face.

"They'll wait." I kiss the back of her neck, right where another man once put his hand and died for it. "I did."

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# CHAPTER 24

Manon

I shift on the chair at Daphne’s desk, with a view of the corpse of an eighty-year-old woman, and wondering if I will have the opportunity to sit on Laszlo's face in between my shifts. My mind keeps wandering to yesterday afternoon, to that part when I had to leave his office to get to the hospital, because I was late.

God, the state of me when I left that building. If anyone else would have taken a good look at me, they’d have said I’d been ravaged by a posse of men all afternoon. Well, it was just one, and it wasn’t all afternoon.

Laszlo told his associates that he needed fifteen minutes, but it took him an hour to properly and utterly ruin me. My shirt was missing a button; it’s probably somewhere under that walnut table. I had to walk past Renata at the reception looking like that. The woman couldn't look me in the eye when we left the conference room. She just stared at her screen while Laszlo said something about resuming the meeting, completely calm, not a hair out of place, because of course he had a way of looking immaculate no matter what. He wasn’t the least bit embarrassed because he's incapable of it, while my face was so hot I could have cooked an egg on it.

I heard the conference room door opening, then voices, and I swear to God I have never moved so fast in my entire life. I rushed outside while Laszlo was calling for me, but I just shouted that I was late for my shift. There was

no way I could have stayed and made small talk with a dozen men who had just heard me get an orgasm.

I was useless for my whole shift after, so much that a nurse asked if I was coming down with something. I said yes, because what was I supposed to say? ‘No, Priya, no fever. It’s just that my husband narrated a murder to me like a bedtime story and then proceeded to fuck me over a conference table until I found God, his angels, and every saint, while his business associates took notes through the wall.’

"You've been staring at Mrs. Ingle for ten minutes," Daphne says without looking up from her clipboard. "She's not going to get any deader."

"I'm paying my respects."

"You're a million miles away." She puts the clipboard down and peels her gloves off, then turns around and stares at me like she already figured that I had the best sex of my life yesterday. "So. Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Manon. How was it?"

"How was what?"

"The sex. You finally had sex with your hot husband."

I open my mouth to deny it, then catch my reflection in the fridge door and shut it again, because I'm smiling. I've been smiling this entire time. I've been sitting here next to a dead pensioner grinning like a lunatic, and I didn't even notice. I need to get myself checked in.

"Oh my God," Daphne says. "Your face. Look at your face."

"Stop it."

"That good?"

"Daphne, there were people in the next room. Business associates of Laszlo’s from Chicago and my father’s people, too…"

"NO."

"They heard everything. I had to rush out of the building like a burglar escaping a bank. Now all these people went home knowing things about me."

She's laughing so hard she has to hold on to the trolley, and Mrs. Ingle jiggles a little, which shouldn't be funny but it is. Now I'm howling too, and I can't remember the last time I was this carefree. Actually I can. It was before my brother decided to stab one of Laszlo's men in his club, so it's been a very long time.

"Domestic relations, baby," she manages, wiping under her eye with her wrist. "You're strengthening ties with Illinois."

"I hate you."

"Shut up. You love me. Let's go out for drinks." She winks. "I know we've never really done it but isn't it time? I want every single detail and I'm not hearing them in front of Mrs. Ingle. She's had enough excitement for one lifetime."

"Saturday? Somewhere awful. Somewhere with umbrellas in the drinks."

"If there isn't a plastic monkey hanging off my glass, I'm sending it back," she says, pulling on fresh gloves. "Go on, go and do medicine on the living. I'll be down here with the only men in this building who keep their hands to themselves—which frankly, at this point, I'd take a bit less of."

I'm still smiling when I leave. I'm walking through the basement feeling genuinely happy that I let my husband ruin me until I was truly his.

Damn it, I'm not Laszlo's, but he proved to me yesterday and countless times before that there was never anyone else.

Since the wedding I've been counting down until I could walk away free from this marriage. One year, then I'm free—that was the deal—and I've marked off every single day like a prisoner. This morning I didn't. I got up, got dressed, came to work, and it never once crossed my mind to check how many days I had until I could drop Novak from my passport.

Upstairs, my shift swallows me whole, which is exactly what I need. Two activations before six, a wound check, and a man who keeps calling me

sweetheart until I fantasize about putting a chest tube in without giving him anesthetic. And for three hours I don't think about Laszlo's mouth or his hands once, which I'm proud of because this morning, I couldn't sit down without wincing.

It's around eight when I head up to the ICU to chase a bed. My post-op from this morning needs monitoring and they've been sitting on it since lunch. I've already called four times. There's only one thing left to do, and that's physically stand at their desk and refuse to leave until someone helps me. It works every time. Nobody wants an angry doctor blocking their station.

I cut through the surgical outpatient wing because the main elevator is out again, and I'm halfway across the waiting area when I see him.

Laszlo's father is sitting in the third row of chairs at the end on my side, in a gray suit, with a folded newspaper on his knee, chatting to the elderly woman next to him. She's laughing at whatever he's saying and patting his sleeve. I almost smile because that is exactly what happened with my mother at the wedding. The Novak charm. Laszlo didn't lick it off the sidewalk.

Then my brain catches up with my eyes and the smile vanishes.

What is he doing here? Nobody told me he was being seen for anything. Laszlo tells me everything about his family these days, usually at dinner, including things I never asked to know, which cousin can't be trusted with money, which uncle is banned from two countries. But not this. Not his own father having a hospital visit this evening.

He hasn't seen me yet, and I don't go over to him because I don't want him to think I'm following him. He must be here for a reason, and neither Laszlo nor his mother or Dolores have mentioned that Kazik had any health issues.

I head over to the desk to get on with my work. I go to the ICU, get my scan report, and read over it as I retrace my steps. When I reach the waiting room, his chair is empty. The newspaper is still lying on the seat, folded open at the crossword. I walk to it. He managed to do half of it.

Dr. Shah is at the nurses' station writing up his notes. I walk over and don't bother being casual about it because there's no point.

"The gentleman who just left. Gray suit, silver hair. Kazik Novak. He's my father-in-law. I didn't know he was being seen here."

Shah looks up over his glasses. "You didn't know?"

"Nobody told me."

"Ah." He pulls the file up on his screen and turns it toward me. "Annual follow-up. Bloods and a scan, same week every year. He's been coming in like clockwork." He pauses. "Dr. Valmont, according to this file, you were on his case. Seven years ago." He taps the screen. "There's quite a story in these notes."

I frown because I don't understand what he means. I have never treated Laszlo's father. I would remember treating Laszlo's father. So I lean in and read the file.

The dates come first, and there it is in black and white. Seven years ago, in March. High-speed car accident on the Taconic Parkway. Four broken ribs, punctured lung, a spleen the imaging said was fine but wasn't. His blood pressure kept dropping and nobody could find the source. The surgical team signed off on it. Stable, they said. Nothing more to do.

And then come the notes. Pages and pages of them, and running through every one, my name.

Dr. M. Valmont.

Me. My maiden name that I still use at work, on notes I should remember writing. Flagging the numbers that didn't match the imaging. Requesting a re-scan when the attending had already signed off. I start to remember now… Getting told no. Asking again. Getting told absolutely not. Staying past the end of my shift, cornering my attending in the break room on his way out, and telling him I wasn't going home until they opened that man back up.

They opened him up because of me. The bleed was in a place three previous scans had shown clean. Small, tucked away, easy to miss. He would have been dead by morning.

Everything floods back, all at once. Not his face or name, but the feeling. The numbers on the chart that wouldn't sit right. The attending looking at me like I was wasting his time. My own hands shaking as I wrote the last note, because I knew I was putting my job on the line if I was wrong.

I wasn't wrong.

I scroll down to the end of the file, and my hands aren't steady anymore. Seven years of annual follow-ups. Full recovery. Every scan clean. Today's bloods: perfect.

I stand there staring at the screen, and everything is falling into place at once.

Yet, I don't want it to.

Seven years. Can’t be a coincidence.

My husband mentioned it. Seven years he’s had his eyes on me. It never once occurred to me to ask why. Why not six, why not ten? Why that year? I feel a little sick.

I can't believe I didn't remember his face at the wedding or from the photograph on Laszlo's desk, even though something did tug at my memory strings. His father had been dying, bleeding out from the inside, and I was responsible for his recovery. How could I not recognize him? He was a patient for one week of my first year at this hospital. I moved on and forgot him. That's what we do. I was taught to let patients go or drown, so I followed the rules.

I saved Laszlo's father, and I had no idea. While somewhere across this city a man I had never met, the patient’s son, found out my name.

And he never told me. All these months. All the fights. He told me what he did for seven years. He never told me why.

"Everything all right?" Dr. Shah asks.

"Fine." I straighten up and give him back his screen. "Small world."

I finish my shift and can’t remember how. It’s ten o'clock and I'm sitting in my car in the garage with my seatbelt on. Honestly, I can’t even remember

how I managed to do my work after that bomb fell on me. I think about calling Daphne, but I don't. I think I might cry, and I don't even know what about because nothing sad has happened—a man is alive because of me, so this is the best possible scenario.

It's just too big though, this whole thing. This fact must have been the entire reason why Laszlo started stalking me in the first place and why we got married.

I drive home and when I go up the driveway, the lights are still on. Of course, he’s waiting for me.

He's in the kitchen when I come in, sleeves rolled up, jacket over the back of a chair. The table is laid for two—properly laid with cloth napkins, the fine china plates his mother gave us that I feel stressed actually eating off of. Something in the oven smells like it's been cooking for hours. He's opening a bottle of wine, and when he hears me he looks up. His entire face transforms with pure joy. My stomach can’t handle it.

"You're late," he says. "I kept the food warm for you."

*I know where you were seven years ago…*

I hang up my coat.

He's plated up before I'm done washing my hands. We sit down and the food is beautiful, a slow-cooked stew that Dolores might have started but he likely finished. I start to push it around my plate, unable to taste. Time ticks in silence.

Then he puts his fork down and looks at me.

"All right," he says. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Manon. You've been home for ten minutes and you haven't insulted me once. Something happened."

I wasn't going to do this tonight. I'd planned to sleep on it, to work out what I wanted to say first. But I've never been able to hold anything in, and he's

watching me like he already knows something’s up. That only makes me angrier because he always knows everything, while I don’t.

"I saw your father today, at the hospital. He was in the surgical outpatient wing for his annual follow-up." I put my fork down too because my hands are shaking and I don't want him to see it. "I looked at his file, Laszlo. I know I shouldn't have, but I did. My name is all over it. I treated him seven years ago, when I was a first-year. I'm the one who fought to have him re-opened when several scans said he was fine. I found the bleed that was killing him. I never knew who he was—I obviously had no recollection. And you never told me."

He stops chewing his food but doesn't say anything.

"Seven years," I say, and my voice breaks a little. "I know what that means. You know too… you’ve known. Not once did you tell me why you mentioned that number, and I didn’t ask. So tell me now. Why didn't you tell me?"

He's quiet for a moment. Then he looks down at his glass, avoiding my gaze. This man can stare down a room full of armed men without blinking, I’m sure, but right now he can't even look at me.

"Everything you've found out about me since the night you agreed to the marriage has been ugly," he says. "The photographs. The reports. Me breaking into your apartment. Moving your books. All of it was me taking from you without asking. This was different. You saved my father's life. You did it on your own, for nothing, without even knowing who he was. That was the one thing between us that was clean." He turns the glass once on the coaster. "If I told you, it would have just ended up in the same pile as everything else I've done. One more secret I kept from you. I couldn't stand that. It was the only thing I hadn't ruined. The thing you did. The thing you gave me as a gift, without ever expecting anything in return. Because it’s you. You’re like that. You save." He swallows, then lifts his gaze to me. “You saved him.”

I make myself ask the question I've been carrying inside me all evening because I have to know, even though I'm afraid of the answers.

"Is that what this is?" I ask. "You found out I saved your father, you felt like you owed me, and this is you paying it back? Because if that's what I am to you, Laszlo, a debt, then just tell me. I'd rather know." Even though him forcing me to marry him isn't exactly what I'd ever have called paying a debt.

"No," he says without hesitation. I can see that he is fighting with himself to stay calm, but he can't lie to me right now. He won't. "It started as a debt I wanted to pay. It stopped being one the first time I saw you. You were sitting on the hospital stairs, eating a sandwich, too tired to get up, and I forgot why I'd come. I only wanted your name. I was going to send money and walk away." His voice drops, roughens. "Then I wanted to know you. Then I wanted to know everything, and I couldn't stop. I'm a controlled man, Manon. It's the thing I'm actually best at. And I couldn't control this for a single day of seven years." He shakes his head. His eyes glaze over but no, he's not crying. He can't be. "It was never gratitude. Gratitude wears off. This never did. I've loved you since before you knew I was alive."

I cannot speak. The oven hums. My throat has gone tight and there's a pressure building behind my eyes that I refuse to give in to, because if I start crying at this table I don't know what I'll do next. He's just told me he's loved me for seven years, across a dinner table, without any drama or fancy declarations. He's just sitting there, speaking quietly from the soul. And the thing that's undoing me is that he isn't waiting for me to say it back. He isn't asking me for anything at all. He told me because it was true, and now he's letting me sit with it. This is so much more devastating than demanding that emotion of me.

"I don't love you," I blurt out.

He doesn't move. He just keeps staring at me.

"*Yet*," I hear myself add, and I don't know which one of us that word ambushes more. "I don't love you yet. And I'm not saying this to punish you. You just told me the truth, so I'm telling you the truth back. Six months ago I was begging you for my brother's life. I never chose any of this, and I'm still holding on to the end of this year because it's mine. It's the only thing in this marriage that's mine. So that's where I am. That's what I've got."

I wish he’d shout at me, but instead, that warmth he had a second ago just drains away. His mouth tightens, and for a moment he looks almost tired, like a man who got exactly the answer he'd braced for. He nods slowly, and he chooses not to argue, not to push. I hate that I can read him this clearly now because the man who buys headstones, breaks into my home, and kills a man for me is sitting across the table swallowing my "not yet" like it's no less than he expected and no more than he deserves. He looks down at his plate. His jaw tightens.

"All right," he says quietly, and picks his fork back up. "Eat something. It's gone cold."

That's it. No pressure, no reaching for my hand, no speech. He asks me if Dr. Shah is the one with the glasses, and tells me his father has been doing crosswords since he was a little boy, a habit he’s never broken. We eat dinner like an ordinary married couple while my chest aches the whole way through.

It's later, lying in the dark next to him, listening to him breathe, that I finally stop running from it. I told him I don't love him. I said it to his face, and I think it might be the biggest lie I've ever told, because for months I have been denying all these feelings, the emotions that come rushing when I am with him.

I'm falling for him.

I'm falling for my husband, and I can't tell him because the end of this year is my way out, my freedom, my life back, and I've been holding on to that door handle like a woman hanging off the side of a boat in a storm.

But I didn't check the calendar today either. And lying here, like this, with my husband, I'm starting to think that when I finally let go of the handle, it won't be because he took it from me. It'll be because I stopped wanting the way out.

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# CHAPTER 25

Laszlo

"It's Saturday night. We shouldn't be working," Rafe points out. He is a man of few words, so I take this very seriously, since he never has opinions about us working on a weekend.

I glance up from the paperwork. He and Tomek are throwing a ball between them across my home office. I haven't told them to stop because I'm trying not to check my phone constantly like a psycho and I don't want them to notice.

Manon has been working all day, and then she messaged to say she wasn't coming home after her shift because she was going out with a friend. That was the entire message. *Going out with a friend. Don't wait up.* Who the hell is this friend? Manon is an introvert who doesn't have any friends, unless it’s a new friend—see, I’m doing my best to be less ‘hands on’ with her—and the fact that she didn't say where or even until when is already giving me heart palpitations.

I'm itching to know where she is and who's standing within ten feet of her. It would take one phone call. I wouldn't even need to make it myself—I could raise an eyebrow at Rafe and have the name of the bar, the name of the bartender, and what she's drinking within four minutes. For seven years, knowing where Manon is has been my religion, and I practice it more faithfully than any priest who’s ever lived.

But after our last conversation, I'm forcing myself to give her space.

*I don't love you yet,* she said. Yet. One word. I've been thinking about it constantly, analyzing it, taking it apart, and I've come to the conclusion that she wants to drive me insane with a single *yet*. So tonight I'm trying to be the kind of husband who might turn a *yet* into a *yes*, and it turns out that such a husband stays home on a Saturday signing invoices for embalming fluid while his wife drinks cocktails in some undisclosed location. I've read the same invoice four times. I've straightened the pen tray twice. I need something to focus on, and these things are within reach.

I suck at this good husband shit.

Tomek catches the ball and doesn't throw it back, which is how I know he's about to say something.

"Boss. Serious question."

"Those are rarely your strongest."

"It's Saturday night. Can we at least go and get some pierogi? There's a place in Brooklyn, my aunt's cousin runs it, and on Saturdays she does them fried, with the onions—"

"Hmmm." I grunt.

"...and the sour cream comes in a little jug, Boss. She doesn't bring out the little jug for just anyone."

"If you say one more word to me about dumplings, I'm putting you on the cremation logs until Christmas."

He appeals to Rafe with a look. Rafe is standing at the window with his back to the room, and without turning around he says, "It's a good place."

Rafe is my complete opposite. My hair and skin are dark; his hair is blond, his skin is fair. We share the same eye color, deep blue, but his Eastern European bone structure makes women stop talking mid-sentence when he walks into a room. Unfortunately, I only get a glance and the occasional moan. I doubt that’s on account of my being half Italian. He's covered in tattoos from his neck to his knuckles, his nose has been broken twice, and

somehow all of it just makes him better looking, which I find personally offensive, seeing that I’m the boss here. Bartenders give him free drinks. Widows come up to me at funerals—at *funerals*—to ask if he's single. Women take one look at Rafe and their underwear simply evaporates. It’s all wasted, if you ask me.

In Rafe, I see a murderer with good bone structure and some deep, old wound that will probably never heal. I've known him for twenty years. He once got through a funeral, a police interview, and a four-hour drive without saying a single word, and the thing that finally drags testimony out of him is fried dough.

"Fine," I give in, dropping the pen. "The two of you are Polish, my father is Polish, and the Italian half of me has never once won a fight against fried dough. If I spend one more Saturday evening alone with Dolores's reheated casserole I'm going to start eating out. Actually I’m done with that. Pierogi it is."

Tomek celebrates by throwing the ball at the back of Rafe's head. Rafe catches it without looking, then crosses the room and lays his phone on the desk in front of me. His sleeves are rolled to the elbow, the ink running all the way down, and I catch myself admiring the work.

"Before the pierogi," he says, "have a look at this."

The first photograph is from Bushwick, the packing house. My men have spent three nights sitting outside it. A heavyset man stands at the loading door with a clipboard. It appears he’s checking boxes off against a list. Then Rafe swipes to a second photo, taken tonight in bad light.

“Somebody posted this?”

Rafe grunts.

Same man, corner booth in a bar somewhere, jacket off, sweating, a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket in front of him. There's a crowd around him laughing, maybe at something he said. He looks like the one footing the bill, and that bottle of Brut looks expensive.

"Ferro's transport manager," Rafe says. "Signs on everything that leaves their building."

"And guess where he is right now." Tomek abandons the ball entirely and comes around the desk. "Marek's cousin pours drinks at this place down by the river, yeah? Texts Rafe an hour ago—this guy's been in there since nine o'clock buying rounds for the whole room. The whole room, Boss. Champagne. Plural champagne."

"On a transport manager's wages," I say.

"A year ago Ferro's couldn't cover their fuel bills," Rafe says.

"And tonight their paperwork man is throwing money around like he owns the place." I turn the phone toward the light and study the sweating, generous face of a man spending money he shouldn't have. Somebody has been filling his pockets, and I'd dearly like to know whose name is on the envelope.

"I want an hour with him," Rafe says. "The caskets. Whose bodies. Who books the flights. Which boxes customs never opens."

I haven't heard Rafe say that many words in a row in years. He must really want this man.

I look at the photograph for a long moment, and then at my own phone, lying face-down beside the pen tray where it's been punishing me all evening.

Somewhere across this city my wife is drinking cocktails or whatever she wants to drink with somebody, and I've just been handed a legitimate professional reason to leave the house and go hunting in cocktail bars. God has a sense of humor. He and I have an understanding.

"Get the car," I say. "And listen to me, both of you. We're talking to him and nothing else. He walks out of that bar tonight in the same condition he walked in, minus whatever he tells us. We're following the money up, not spreading him around the furniture."

"And the pierogi?" Tomek asks, wounded.

"After. Work first, dumplings after. That's how empires are built."

The bar, when we find it, has a neon flamingo over the door, and the decor doesn't improve from there. Inside, everything is pink, gold and wicker, the music is louder than anywhere like this I've ever been, and the cocktail menu taped to the door is entirely puns. There’s even a small dance floor, unoccupied at present.

After seeing the picture, I assumed this would be a fancy place that would appeal to women. The latter seems true as it’s in a respectable area and I see them sitting here in groups, but how in hell would this outfit have thousand-dollar bottles of champagne on the menu? Maybe that’s the appeal. Luxury dressed up as comfort, much like those torn up T-shirts designers love to sell for hundreds of bucks.

I'm the only man in the building in a black suit, which works fine for a meeting but here makes me look less like a respected businessman and more like somebody's disappointed father arriving to take them home. Tomek looks around like he's arrived in heaven. Rafe looks bored, but that's just his permanent expression.

I spot our man almost immediately. He's sprawled across the booth, ice bucket beside him, his hair matted to his face, and his audience looks exhausted because he keeps talking.

I'm studying the layout of the place when I hear something that empties my head of Ferro, the caskets, the money, and every other thought I've ever had.

Her laugh. I'd know that laugh through a wall. I'd know it underwater. It cuts straight through the music, and my whole body turns toward it like it's been trained. Because it has. And there she is, my wife, on a barstool with her shoes hooked over the rail and her hair down, holding an enormous blue drink with a paper umbrella in it. Unless my eyes are failing me, there’s also a small plastic monkey hanging off the rim. Beside her, a stunning redhead I've never seen in my life is telling a story with lots of hand gestures, and Manon is laughing so hard she has to set the drink down on the bar.

I didn't follow her here, and this needs to be noted somewhere before she knows I'm here. After all the engineered coincidences and carefully purchased information about her, the one single night I stay home and

behave myself like a domesticated animal, fate walks me into her bar with two armed men and a photograph of a smuggler in my pocket. She's going to think I tracked her phone. I've made a lot of effort teaching her exactly what kind of man I am, and tonight, the time it finally matters, I'm innocent.

"Boss," Rafe says quietly. He's seen her too. "I didn't know."

"I know you didn't."

"Is that Mrs. Novak?" Tomek is already lifting his hand to wave, and I catch his wrist on the way up.

Too late. Manon turns around.

For half a second she looks surprised, almost pleased even, and I'd pay serious money to have that half-second frozen in time. Then her expression changes because her husband, who has a documented history of obsessive stalking, is standing by the door with two of his men. Her eyes narrow. She says something to the redhead without taking her eyes off me, slides down off the stool, and walks toward me with the face of a woman planning a homicide.

"You," she says, "have got to be kidding me."

"Manon—"

"One night. I take one night out for myself, Laszlo. I texted you like a normal wife. I said *don't wait up*—"

"I need you to hear something extraordinary." I put my hand over my heart, and for the first time in living memory the gesture is sincere. "I did not follow you, I didn't call anyone, and these two witnesses can vouch for me. I have a paper trail, too. I'm here for work."

She scans the three of us. Rafe has developed a deep interest in the ceiling fan, though I notice his eyes keep drifting to the redhead at the bar, who is watching this whole exchange with a wide-ass grin. Tomek nods so earnestly, it actually makes us look guiltier.

"Work," she says, folding her arms across her chest. "In a bar like this."

"This, uh, place wasn't my choice, with all the pink and flamingoes, and we were planning to eat pierogi tonight before something came up and brought us here."

"Do you seriously expect me to believe that out of every bar in this entire city, you decide to come here for any reason other than to keep an eye on me?"

"*Ma macabre.*" I lean in close enough that only she can hear me over the music. That’s a mistake, because up close I finally get the full picture of what she's wearing. Now, every clever thing I was about to say evacuates my skull at once. Gone are the scrubs, the stationery keeping her hair up or the pony tail, the sensible flats. She’s all woman in a black dress that barely covers her thighs and high-heeled, black and gold, tiger-print pointy pumps I’ve never seen her in. Her hair looks so silky and lush, so bouncy around her face. I am lost for words. My mind freezes and so does my cock, at full mast.

She got dressed like this tonight, took these clothes to work to change into. And then she came here, looking like that, for every man in this room to see for free. I would like to burn the building down, but I need to finish my sentence first.

"If I had followed you," I manage, "you would have never seen me. You know my work. This—" I gesture at myself, at the pink lighting, at the entire ruined operation of my presence in this establishment, "—is what innocence looks like. I understand it's unfamiliar."

And over my wife's shoulder, at the far corner of the room, I watch the champagne bucket come up off the table. Ferro's man is out of the booth and shrugging on his jacket, shaking someone’s hand, and Rafe is already peeling off the wall without being told, quiet as smoke, while Tomek drifts wide toward the door. Now I've got two problems in the same room: the wife in front of me and the work moving behind her, both demanding my full attention, neither willing to wait.

"Don't move," I tell Manon. "I want to be accused of everything properly, and I want to meet your friend. But first I need to borrow a gentleman for a short conversation about caskets."

"Laszlo." Her eyes narrow again. "What did you come here to do?"

"Nothing dramatic. I'm going to buy a man a drink," I say, already moving, "and find out who bought him the last one."

She doesn't seem to believe me, but I have to leave her anyway.

The conversation happens in the back, between the restrooms and the fire exit. Not the kind of atmosphere I favor for business, but you work with the venue you're given. The transport manager is drunk enough to be brave for a sliver of time. Then Rafe comes through the door behind me, and all that courage blows away in a puff of smoke.

"Sit down," I tell him, and he gingerly sits on a beer crate like it's an electric chair. "Relax. I promised my wife I'd buy you a drink. First, you're going to answer some questions, and my colleague is going to remember your answers. His memory is very good. Let’s get this over with because unfortunately, I have somewhere to be."

We get through two questions. He's already talking quite fast. Rafe just standing there, saying nothing, always works like a charm. Through the open door I can see the bar, and there I can see my wife and the redhead, both of them turned around on their stools, watching us openly like this is dinner theater. Manon has her arms crossed. The redhead is eating peanuts.

My wife came out tonight to have fun, and her husband is interrogating a sweaty man by the restrooms.

"Finish it," I tell Rafe. "Gently. When he's told you everything, buy him a drink and put him in a taxi."

Rafe nods, which from him counts as a signed contract, and I walk back to the bar, straightening my jacket.

The redhead sticks her hand out before I've even arrived. "I'm Daphne, and I've decided we're friends."

"Laszlo. How do you two know each other?" This is genuinely interesting, because Manon has never mentioned any friends or anyone close to her, not counting Charles. She didn't even have bridesmaids at the wedding. In the years I’ve followed her, she’s always kept to herself, except a few meals

with colleagues. Have I ever seen her with this one? I don’t recall. Maybe she hasn’t been working at the hospital long…

"We work together! Well, she works upstairs, I work in the basement."

I glance at Manon. *The basement.* My wife releases a sigh. That’s telling.

"What do you do in the basement?"

"I’m a mortuary technician at the hospital." She announces it the way other women say *I'm in fashion.* "She loses them, I catch them."

"*Daphne*," Manon says.

"What? It's a system. It works."

I look at this woman properly for the first time. She's beaming at me, zero fear, zero clue. She has no idea whose hand she just shook. She spends her days elbow-deep in corpses and has somehow stayed the single most innocent person I've ever met. And my wife, who grew up counting exits and checking cars for strangers, picked *her*.

"So what do you do?" Daphne asks. The glow on her face is no doubt partly thanks to the cocktail she’s picking up for a sip.

Manon closes her eyes, very slowly, as if praying for a power cut.

"Funnily enough, we're in the same industry," I say. "I also work with dead people. You handle the arrivals, I handle the departures. You might not be amazed how few people at parties want to stand near either of us."

Daphne laughs so hard, she slaps the bar while nodding vigorously. "That's hilarious. Manon, he's hilarious—you said he was *difficult.* He’s right, too. Wait," she narrows her eyes on me, and for one moment I think she's seeing through me, "do you two, like, *talk about it at home?* The mortician work thing. Over dinner? That's the most romantic thing I can ever imagine."

She has understood absolutely nothing, and I like her enormously.

"Excuse us, Daphne." I take the blue drink out of my wife's hand and set it on the bar. "I need to dance with my wife."

"I don't dance with stalkers," Manon says, but her friend shoves her toward me, giggling to herself.

I size her up once, twice, because I'm a thorough man.

"Lucky for you I'm innocent tonight. Ask my lawyer." I scratch my jaw. "That dress is very short."

"Is it?"

"There's not a lot of it."

She nods like I've raised a good point. Then she turns around and starts looking for something. On the floor, behind her. She checks under the table, actually bends down to look, then straightens up and pats her chest like she might've tucked it in her bra.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Hang on." She turns a full circle. Peers into her friend's drink. "Nope. Not in there either."

"Manon."

"I'm looking for the fuck I give about your opinion." She stops, faces me, and puts both middle fingers up about an inch from my nose. "Can't find it. Weird. Must be because I never asked for it."

Her friend chokes on her drink.

I don't laugh. I close the gap instead, place a hand on the small of her back, and pull her in until her middle fingers are crushed flat between us. Her mouth is at my collar. Mine is close to her ear.

"Two things," I say firmly. "One. It bothers me that other men can see what’s under the dress, and two, I've never been harder in my life."

I don’t let her come up with the answer. I just drag her to the dance floor.

Her hair is loose over her bare shoulders. She's warm and flushed from the cocktails, swaying against me with her arms around my neck, and I'm even harder in under a minute—from a steel rod to a fucking beam in no time. How is that possible? I watched this woman dance in other men's arms

before, and I would have committed serious crimes to be the one holding her. Tonight I'm the one holding her, and I'm about one song away from committing crimes anyway.

I slide my hands lower from her waist, toward the part of her I want to kiss and worship. She catches the right one and moves it back up. It goes lower again, because I can't help myself. She catches it again.

"Laszlo," she warns me, but there's amusement in her voice.

"The dress started it."

"Behave. Daphne—"

"—is at the bar ordering another monkey. She'll survive." I bend to her ear. "There's a bathroom eight steps behind you. Door locks."

"We are not—"

"Fire exit, then. Very private. Romantic lighting from the beer signs."

"You're unbelievable."

"There's also my car. Heated seats. I'm presenting options, *ma macabre*, because if you keep moving against me like that, the flamingo is going to witness something it can never unsee…"

That's when a table goes over.

Glass everywhere, a woman shrieking, the music still pumping while half the bar scrambles back from the corner booth. And then there is Rafe, a stranger bent backward over the bar, and a knife against his throat. Rafe is as calm as a man holding a door open.

Why does this always happen? I get one moment with my wife and the whole night goes to hell. I rush to his side with Manon right behind me.

"Rafe." The face of the man under the knife is bright purple. I don't know him. He's nobody. "What the hell happened here?"

"He touched the redhead."

I stare at him. In all the years I've known him, I've never seen him get close to doing anything like this. Basically, emotion is not what he does. Ever.

I once watched a model write her number on his hand at a wake, and he washed it off in front of her. I've long since concluded the man felt nothing for anyone and made my peace with it, and now he's holding a knife to a stranger's throat over a woman he just saw for the first time. Never talked to her, doesn't even know her name. I'm witnessing a miracle. Honestly, I'm a little emotional.

"Her hand," Tomek supplies, appearing at my shoulder. "He touched her hand. On the bar. It was like one second, Boss."

"He won't do it again," Rafe says to the room, to the man, to God.

"Excuse me, *what is wrong with you?*" Daphne shoves through the crowd, monkey glass still in hand, furious. "I was talking to him! He was cute! We were getting somewhere, and you… I don't even know you! Nobody asked you to do whatever this is!" She jabs a finger at Rafe, then points at the knife and Purple Man beneath it. "Stay out of my business!"

Rafe doesn't say a word, but doesn't let go of the man, either. He just stares at Daphne, and for the first time in twenty years I watch confusion settle on his face. He genuinely doesn't understand what he did wrong. In his head, this was a favor.

"Rafe." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "We do not kill people in bars with flamingos on them. Have some professional standards. Put him down."

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# CHAPTER 26

Manon

Rafe is short for Rafal, a Polish name the man hasn't answered to since he was a kid, according to Laszlo, who told me this over dinner once like it was classified information.

He didn't mention that Rafe is able to hold a knife the way I hold a scalpel in surgery. His hands are steady, and it's almost like he's stopped breathing.

The man under it knows exactly where the knife is. There's a vein jumping in his neck about an inch from the blade, and if this goes on much longer he's going to pass out, then I'll be on my knees doing first aid on a floor covered in grime and spilled alcohol—in a dress I can barely sit down in, no less.

"Rafe." Laszlo keeps his voice level, soothing. "Put him down."

Rafe lets go, lowering the knife to his side, and the man slides down the bar, both hands on his throat, gulping air like a fish. Laszlo crouches next to him. He pats him on the shoulder, twice, and says something I can't hear. The man keeps nodding. Then Laszlo takes some money out of his jacket, tucks it into the man's shirt pocket, and pats that, too.

I really was hoping to protect my friend from this world. Daphne is standing in the mess with her monkey glass still in her hand.

"Excuse me, what is wrong with you?" she says to Rafe. "Who even are you? Are you a police officer? Nope. Police don’t act like that."

Rafe glances at her, then away, then back. His jaw works like he's chewing something. He wipes his palm down the side of his pants with the knife hand, looking rough and nervous.

"I don't even know your name," Daphne keeps babbling, "and you put a knife on someone for me. Nobody asked you to." She’s right to be mad though.

Rafe's throat moves as he tries to form a coherent sentence in response. That man barely speaks in front of me. I'm not a therapist, but there must be reasons behind his bizarre behavior.

"He shouldn't have," he rasps. I almost feel sorry for him.

"Shouldn't have what?"

"Touched you."

Daphne stares at him with her mouth agape. Then she sticks her hand out to me without looking, the way she does at work when she wants me to pass her something and can't be bothered to say what.

"Manon. Get me away from this person."

I take her arm. There's a booth by the wall that four people have just left in a hurry. I steer her into it and slide in after her. She puts the monkey glass down very carefully, then picks it up again and finishes it in one go.

"Your husband's friends," she says, wiping her mouth, "are a lot."

"He's not a friend."

"So what is he?"

I open my mouth to explain what Rafe does for Laszlo, then shut it. There is no real explanation that I can say out loud. He's the cleaner. The executioner. I can't tell Daphne that the man she just shouted at carved a stranger's dick off on a boat because my husband gave him the order through his brother.

"Staff," I say.

"Staff." She pulls the umbrella out of the glass and starts shredding it. "Right. Because staff normally—"

"Hi." Tomek arrives at the table looking every inch a labrador that's escaped from his owner. He's got a bottle of water in each hand and no idea what he's doing with either. "Sorry. Boss said to check if you're okay. Are you okay? You look okay. You look great, actually. Not in a … I don't mean … I mean you're not hurt. That's what I'm checking."

"I'm fine," Daphne says.

"Good. Good." He puts one water in front of her, thinks about it, and puts the other one down too. "That's Rafe, by the way. He's not, um, he's not usually … well, he is, but not about … he doesn't normally do that for people. He doesn't do anything for people. I once watched him step over a guy having a heart attack because the man was in front of the coffee machine."

"Tomek, please," I say.

"Right. Sorry. No, that sounded worse out loud." He rubs the back of his neck. "I'm just saying he's not dangerous. To you. To other people, yeah, obviously, that's kind of the job. But you'll be fine. He probably just liked your… I don't know. Face. Hair. He didn't say. He never says. Sorry. I'm Tomek."

He sticks his hand out.

Daphne stares at him in disbelief, then her face brightens with a smile. She shakes his hand.

"Oh, I like you," she says. "You're nice."

Rafe is close enough to our table to hear it. He's been leaning on the bar with his back half to us, and when Daphne speaks he turns his head and looks at the back of Tomek's neck. Tomek, who's known him for years and should know better, is grinning at Daphne like she's pinned a medal on him. Behind him, a man who cut a stranger's penis off on a boat is holding his empty glass hard enough that it might crack. Oh boy, this is not good.

Daphne sees it. So she smiles at Tomek even wider, most likely to piss Rafe off as much as possible, and pours herself one of the waters.

"So, Tomek, what do you do?"

"Oh, God," I say.

"I, um... I work for Mr. Novak."

"Doing what?"

He looks at me for help, and I don't even know how to react because who knows how he'll interpret a head shake.

"Eee … a bit of this and that."

"He's very useful," Laszlo says, arriving next to him with his hands in his pockets, jacket buttoned again, hair perfect, like he's just come back from taking a call and not from paying a man to forget his own name. Tomek steps back a foot without being asked. "Ladies, I think the flamingo's given us all it had. Manon."

"We're going?"

"Yes. It's time for us to leave this exceptional establishment." He holds his hand out and I wrap my hand around his. I want to blame the three drinks and the heels, but his palm is warm and I want to ride him. Damn it. "Rafe. Tomek. Take Daphne home."

"No," Daphne says. "Absolutely not."

"Daphne, please."

Wow, my husband said ‘please’. I’m impressed.

"I'll get a cab. I've got a phone. I know how a phone works." She's on her feet, ruined umbrella still in her fingers. "I'm not getting in a car with a man who—"

"Two cars. Tomek drives you. Rafe follows in his own."

Rafe makes a low sound in his throat. Not a word. Just enough to let the room know he doesn't like it.

"It's late," Laszlo goes on, to Daphne now, "and half this bar is paying way too much attention to you right now. My wife would like you to get to your front door in one piece. Do it for her."

Daphne looks at me.

"Go ahead," I say. "For me. I'll bring you a croissant tomorrow."

"Two."

"Two."

She breathes out through her nose, obviously still not convinced. But in the end she picks her bag up and puts it over her shoulder.

"Fine. But he stays in his car." She points the tattered umbrella at Rafe like it's a weapon. "He doesn't get out. He doesn't walk me in or speak to me."

"He wasn't going to speak," Tomek says. "He never—"

"Okay now," I say with false cheerfulness. All I want is for Tomek to shut up.

Rafe of course hasn't said a word this whole time. He's standing three feet away with his jacket over his arm, his eyes on her, and when she says he doesn't speak, something happens at the corner of his mouth that on any other man I'd call the beginnings of a smile.

He tips his head half an inch. That's all she's getting.

Outside, the cold hits my bare legs. Tomek unlocks a car and holds the door open for Daphne. She gets in without looking at any of us. Rafe watches her door shut and the taillights pull away, then goes to his own car and follows them out.

"He's going to sit outside her building all night, isn’t he?" I say.

"Most likely," Laszlo says.

"I thought you said he doesn't like anyone, including women."

"He doesn't. I'd assumed he didn’t have a heart, or maybe something chemically wrong with him." A pause. "Apparently the cure was a redhead

with a tacky cocktail in hand."

He opens my door and I sink into the heated seats. It's total bliss having a rich husband. My thighs are cold and I'm tired. Also, I'm still not sure whether I'm angry at him or not.

"I wonder what happened to him?" I ask when he's behind the wheel. "The following-a-woman-home thing to make sure she's safe… that cannot just be because he's following orders."

He pulls out into the road and I watch the flamingo shrink in the side mirror until it's a pink smear on wet asphalt.

"I don't know. I don't have much of a frame of reference either," he says. "That's the problem."

The drive back is quiet, and for once I'm glad my husband doesn't ask any questions. The road belongs to us and the odd taxi. Laszlo drives with one hand loose on the wheel and the other resting near my knee without quite touching it. I lean my head against the window, enjoying the cool glass on my skin.

"Daphne's the first friend I've had in years," I confess, mostly to the window. "If your murderer staff breaks her, I'm holding you responsible."

"Noted," he says, and pauses. "He won't. He doesn't break things he wants to keep."

I don't ask what he means. Right now, my mind is fried.

Daniel opens the gate and we come up to the lit house. I've been living here a while now, and I need to stop pretending I don't like it. I'm out of the car and up the steps ahead of him, shoes already in my hand because my feet are sore. I hope I don't have blisters.

"I'm going to bed," I tell him in the hall. "Don't wake me when you come up. And don't watch me sleep. I know you do it."

"I do it because you talk in your sleep," he says. "You said something about a scaffolder last week. It was very moving."

"Goodnight, Laszlo."

I go up to the room, which is cozy and warm. Someone's left the lamp lit on my side. I drop my shoes by the door and start on the dress, reaching back for the zipper and losing it halfway. My hands are tired, and I need Laszlo to help me. Somehow, I manage to get the dress off. I hang it up, because if I don't he'll straighten it in the morning and I can't stand watching him do it. I'm in my slip, reaching for the water on the nightstand, when the door opens.

Laszlo's in the doorway, and I know instantly something is wrong. He's out of breath, as though he ran up the stairs, or took them two at a time. His pupils are dilated and his face is flushed. The usual charm, the dry little half-smile are gone. His jaw is tight. His eyes are moving around our room, checking for God knows what, and he’s grabbing his phone tight.

"Get dressed," he says. "Pack a bag fast. We're leaving."

"What? Laszlo, it's two in the morning—"

"Somebody's been in the house."

I lower the glass. "What?"

"I went into my study. Things have been moved." His voice is level as always but unsteady, which is new. "The lamp's on the wrong side of the desk. There are papers in the wrong order. My gun is in the wrong drawer. Somebody's been through that room and tried to put it all back. They were careful but not careful enough. Somebody stood in my house tonight while we were out and touched my things. So I want you dressed in five min—"

"Laszlo."

“What is it?”

I've turned to put the glass down on the nightstand, and now I can't move my hand away from it because there's something sitting next to the lamp that wasn't there when I left this morning.

It's an ear. A human ear, cut off clean, sitting on the little dish where I put my earrings. There's no blood, really. Whoever did this either drained it first or took it off a body that was already dead, because a fresh cut on a living person doesn't look like this.

I start examining it like I'm suddenly on the operating table. Clean edges. No bruising. Done carefully, by someone who knew what they were doing. Then I realize I'm not at work, and I'm just me, standing next to a piece of a person, left on the side of the bed where I sleep.

"Laszlo," I say again. My voice breaks, and the last syllable of his name comes out high-pitched.

He crosses the room and sees it.

He picks up the dish, his hand shaking. Another first. He puts it down and turns to the window, then back, facing me.

"This is a message," he says. His voice cracks. He drags a hand down his face, then takes out his phone. "Someone was in my house," he says. The tone of his voice sends a shiver down my spine. So cold. "They were in my study. And they left something on my wife's side of the bed."

A pause. Whatever Constantine says, it's the wrong thing.

"No. Don't tell me it's handled." He's still not shouting. How on earth does he do that? "It's sitting on her nightstand, Constantine. For fuck’s sake."

Another pause. His eyes find me across the room and instinctively, I take a step back.

"Someone has access." His voice drops lower. "Think about how short that list is. Then think about whose name is on it."

He listens for a short while.

"Wake everyone."

He hangs up.

I start to talk but he lifts a finger to stop me. The look in his eyes… Oh God, the look in his eyes. I purse my lips, seal them shut. He stares at the severed ear, his breathing shallow and fast. Downstairs, the house is already coming alive. I can hear doors opening and closing, muted voices, because he must have made calls when he was still in the study, before he got to this room.

I'm standing in my slip in the middle of our bedroom, and my arms have come up around myself, but I don’t allow myself to loiter for long. I grab a travel bag and start throwing things in it before he chides me for not moving. Underwear, shirts, jeans, my work stuff… enough for a few days.

Inside, I’m a wreck. All the words I want to say to him are stuck in my throat because he won’t let me speak. Who is this man, right now? Where is my husband? This man in front of me, I don’t know him.

I've been living with this man for six months. I’ve thrown a scalpel at him for God’s sakes, and he didn’t ever get angry at me for it. But today, right now, I’m seeing a new side of him. A side I’ve never seen, not even when I bargained for Julien’s life. Not even with Charles. That time, he had control of the situation. He knew who did what and why, and he could deal with it in real time.

He can't keep still. He picks the dish up and puts it down. He paces back and forth, and keeps flexing his fingers. I get dressed, then fold a sweater and put it in the bag. He doesn't tell me to hurry. He just stands there with his back to me, and the not-hurrying is the thing that finally gets into my chest and stays.

"Ready," I say. “What about your stuff?”

“I already have a bag packed for emergencies,” he says. Of course he does.

He turns. For a fleeting moment his face softens as he looks at me, then he takes the bag off my shoulder and his hand comes to the small of my back.

"Stay in front of me on the stairs. Straight into the car. Don't stop in the hall."

We go down through a house that’s now teeming with men, and not one of them looks at me. That's how I know how bad it is. He puts me in the car himself, shuts the door, says something short to Rafe over the roof, and gets in.

Then we're driving. Fast, out through the gates, onto the dark road, and I sit with my bag on my lap, my hands flat on top of it. For the first time since I traded myself for my brother, I'm frightened. And the part I can't make

sense of is that it isn't him I'm afraid of. It's whatever just put that look on his face.

We drive for a long time. The city goes past, then the suburbs, then there's nothing but land, the odd pair of headlights, the occasional truck. He doesn't turn the radio on and I am grateful for that. His hands are steady on the wheel. Too much so. Everything feels … forced. I want to scream and teleport to a different universe. It’s like when I have to force myself to look and sound normal after I've lost a patient and there are still hours of shift left to get through.

"Where are we going?" I ask eventually. My voice is small in the dark.

"Somewhere safe," he says.

That's all. And I believe him, which frightens me in a different way because it means I've started trusting the most dangerous man I've ever met with my well-being.

I don't remember falling asleep. I remember the hum of the road, then nothing, then I'm being lifted and I wake up. The air smells green and crisp with the faint scent of woodsmoke. Laszlo has me in his arms, my face nuzzled against his neck.

"I can walk," I say without lifting my head.

"I know."

He doesn't put me down.

We go into a doorway and inside a room with a bed. Carefully setting me on top of the covers, he takes my shoes off and puts them side by side on the floor, then pulls the blanket over my legs, tucking me in. I flinch, just a fraction. It’s an instinctive reaction because he’s been so very terrifying tonight.

He catches it and pulls his hands away.

"What?" he says.

"Nothing."

"Manon." He crouches by the bed so we're level. "Why are you looking at me like that? Did I frighten you? Did someone touch you tonight? Did I miss something?"

"You," I say.

He waits. Whatever he sees on my face, it makes him careful.

"Tonight. At the house." I'm too tired to hold any of it back now. "I thought I was learning who you were. You've always been kind to me, even when I wasn't nice. Too kind, too good… Then tonight something went wrong, and I saw another Laszlo. The real you, the one you keep hidden from me. The one everybody else likely knows and fears. In our bedroom, you raised a finger at me when I tried to talk to you. Laszlo, you never force me to shut up around you. Never." My throat is tight but I make myself hold his eyes. "That's who you are when you lose control. Still calm, but so very cold. I don't think I can love that man."

Whatever he was bracing for, it wasn't that. The sharp edges are gone from his face, and so is the blood. He goes pale, and he looks so … stricken.

"No," he says. "No, that wasn't—" He pauses, then continues, "I'm sorry, *ma macabre*. Forgive me. That was never aimed at you. I would never aim it at you."

He takes my hand off the blanket in both of his and presses his mouth to my knuckles, then the inside of my wrist. He trails his lips up my arm, dropping kisses all the way, my shoulder, through my clothes, and finally, the side of my throat, quick and desperate, planting words of apology into my skin.

"I lost my grip on reality for a minute. That's all. I'd never hurt you. I'd kill myself first." His forehead comes down against mine and he's unsteady. I bite my bottom lip. "Don't look at me like that. Anything but that. I can stand anything but that."

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# CHAPTER 27

Laszlo

I didn't sleep much, even after we got to the property outside Williamstown, Massachusetts and I carried Manon inside. She fell asleep in the car, some time before we passed the state line. It had been a long night for her. I didn't tell anyone where we were going. Some fucker got into my fortress, and I won't rest until I know who did it and how.

I laid her on the bed and took her shoes off. She was still in the jeans and sweater she'd thrown on before we left, and didn't wake when I pulled the blanket over her. That fucking ear. Someone wanted to make a statement, and it drove me to the edge. Once I was sure she was settled, I went to the living room and started making phone calls. I hadn't even had time to check the mortuary back at the house before we left.

Now it's past nine in the morning and I've been on the phone and pacing all morning. The living room looks like a total fucking mess. I've straightened the rug twice. I've moved the two candlesticks on the mantelpiece so they're the same distance from the edge. I've taken every book off the shelf by the fireplace and put them back in height order, and then in color, and then in height again. None of it helps but my hands need something to do while I wait for something to happen. My brother is talking to me now.

"Say it again," I tell Constantine.

"The east camera dropped for eleven minutes at 11:40. Daniel says it looked like a power flicker, but it wasn't that."

"No."

"They came in through the side door in the mortuary. It was locked when Daniel checked it at midnight."

"Because they locked it behind them. They had a key, Constantine. Somebody gave them a key to my fucking house."

"We're going through a list of everyone who's ever had access. It's a short list and all the keys were returned, Laszlo. We've changed the locks a few times, tightened security. That's the problem."

"Read it to me anyway."

He does. Six names, and I remember every one of them.

"Now tell me which of those six was in the building this week. Deliveries, maintenance, anything. I want to know who came through that door and when. It’s only the regulars who have a key, all vetted."

"I can do that, but it will take a minute."

"And the ear. Rafe has it?"

"Uh-huh."

"I want to know whose it is by tonight. If Rafe has to visit every man in the city missing part of his head, he can start now. That person is probably dead, but I’ll cover all the bases."

"You need to sleep."

"I'll sleep when I know who was standing beside my wife's bed."

I hang up on my brother. I call Rafe next, then Daniel, and make it clear to both that if a camera ever goes dark for eleven minutes again and somebody calls it a flicker, they'll find out exactly how patient I'm not. Daniel responds with ‘yes, boss,’ several times. I want to burn the whole world down.

The hardest thing is the waiting. I don't know what to do with myself, so I decide to make coffee. I don’t even want it, but the routine of grinding the beans and having everything just so is soothing. It’s one thing I can’t get wrong. Sensing she’s awake, I make two. I put the mugs on the counter, side by side, handles pointing the same way. I straighten them. Then I hear a door open, and soft footsteps on the tile. I don't turn around because I don’t think I'm ready to look at her.

"Morning," she says.

"There's coffee."

She comes up next to me, and only then do I notice she's wearing my sweater. She must have taken it off the chair. I like seeing her in my clothes, and I like having her near me, knowing exactly where she is if anything bad comes our way. She reaches for one of the mugs, all warm and rumpled and half awake, and my whole chest hurts just from having her that close.

I take it out of her hand and turn it so the handle lines up with the other one. "It’s still empty." Then I fill both and push hers back toward her without looking at her. My tone is gruff, I can tell. She flinches and moves back from me, and something inside my chest cracks. I’ve been trying to forget what she said to me last night, but that is fucking impossible.

I drag a hand through my hair. How do I convince my wife that I’d never hurt her? She’s seen in person what I can do with my bare hands…

I pick up my mug then put it down carefully, because my hands are not to be trusted. I stare at the back of them.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask, finally facing her. She looks tired, but I can't read her expression beyond that.

"Nothing."

"You … you are scared of me."

"I’m not."

“You flinched when I spoke, just now, like last night.”

"Manon, I know what your face looks like when you're about to throw something at me, and I know what it looks like when you're waiting to be hit, and that was the second one. It doesn’t happen much, so it stands out even more." I know my voice is rough and I'm talking too loud, too fast. I’m making it worse, but I can’t stop. "So I'll ask you again. What is wrong with you?"

"Don't do that." She's got both hands around the small cup now, as if hanging on to that warmth. "Don't ask me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like that. Like you asked Daniel. I heard you when you were talking to him. Hard."

"Daniel let a man walk into my house."

"I know."

"He stood by our bed. He put a piece of somebody on your side of it, on the dish where you place your wedding ring when you take it off, and—"

"I know, Laszlo." She puts the mug down harder than she means to. Coffee spills over the rim. I wipe it with the side of my hand, without thinking, and I hear her take a sharp breath.

"That," she says. "That's what's wrong with me."

"Wiping the counter."

"All of it. The counter, the books, the stuff you keep obsessing on. The way you're standing, so stiff. The way you talked to Daniel and Rafe and your brother." She takes another breath like she's bracing herself, and looks at me as though she’s forcing herself to. "You told me last night this wasn't pointed at me. I believed you. I still do. But I've spent all morning listening to you speak on the phone, and this isn't the person I’ve been getting to know. You haven't even slept, and I don't…" She lets her voice trail away, then starts again. "I've seen you angry. I was there when you killed Charles. I shouldn't have liked it, but this isn't that. This is you not being in control of anything. Without a direction. I've never seen that before, and it frightens me more than anything you've ever done to me on purpose."

I stare at her, finally understanding, and I don't fucking like it. She's right. And that's the problem, because I've spent my whole life making sure nobody is ever right about this. If I answer her honestly, I have to tell her the thing I've never told anyone, ever.

I could make a joke to diffuse the situation and avoid the real thing. It usually works, but not this time. So I say, "Sit down."

She just stares at me, unmoving. Damn, this woman.

"Please," I say.

I don't think I've ever said that word to her without a smirk behind it. This time there's no trace of humor in my tone. She sits down while I remain standing, because putting my body on a stool is too confining. I need to think this through. I put my hands on the counter and will myself not to move them.

"I was eight," I begin. I don't want to tell this story to anyone, least of all my wife, but I know she won't let it go. Besides, I frightened her, so I owe her the truth. "I woke up in the night. It was summer, the window was open, and I heard the cars come in. I thought it was my father getting back from wherever he'd been, and I wanted to see him. I wasn't supposed to be out of bed. I went anyway. I got as far as the door of the garage."

I stop to take a breath. She doesn't say anything. She's a surgeon. She knows how to let a wound talk, so she can figure out how to fix it. Even if it’s not on a physical body, she’d get the concept.

"There were four of my father's men inside, as well as him. And on the floor between them there was…" I stare at my hands, still where I left them. Good. "There was a man. What was left of one, anyway. I knew it was a man because of the shoes. Everything else was wrong. His face wasn't a face anymore. One of his arms was bent at an odd angle. He'd been opened up, like something had gone into him and tore him up, and there was part of him on the floor that should have been inside him. There was a smell I'd never smelled before. I know it very well now."

Manon's hand comes up to her mouth. Then she pulls it away, like she's remembered she shouldn't react, and puts it on the counter, near mine.

"I made a noise. One of the men turned and saw me in the doorway, then just looked at my father, who went back to doing what he was doing. My mother came and got me. I don't know who called her. She picked me up like I was much younger than eight, and carried me back to bed. She sat with me until it was light, and never said a word about it. Nobody ever mentioned it since. I went down to breakfast the next morning and found my father reading the paper like nothing had happened."

I take my hands off the counter, finally, and turn them over, looking at them.

"So. That's why I fix things, make them perfect. That's why I do the dead myself instead of paying someone. That's why a lamp on the wrong side of a desk can make me lose it. Because once, everything in a room was exactly where it should have been, but I opened a door, and there was a person on the floor who'd been turned into pulp. Nobody made it make sense. Nobody put him back together. So I do. Everyone who comes through my mortuary, I make whole again. I close what was opened. I set what was broken. I make them look like they died in their sleep, whether they did or not, and I line the fucking mugs up. I need my study to look the way I left it, because if things stay where I put them, then I know nobody has walked in during the night and turned the whole world upside down."

I let a moment pass. “That’s why I never do the killing myself. Until…” I let my voice trail away.

I look at my wife. I still can't read her expression, but maybe—I hope—she's starting to understand me.

"Last night, an intruder walked into my house and no alarm went off. They did what they were told to do. I'm not eight anymore, lacking control. But dammit, I feel like I’m back there, in that garage, helpless. I never meant for anyone to see that, least of all you."

A long pause ensues, then she picks up her coffee and drinks.

"Where are we?" she asks.

"Williamstown, a couple hours away from the house. We’re in Massachusetts."

She stops with the cup halfway down and raises her eyebrow. Clearly, she remembers the conversation we had at her parents' house, when I passed on the drawings of the headstone. "You own this house?" she asks, tilting her head.

"Yes, I do, among others. This is the closest one to the plot." I nod at the window. "It's about four hundred meters up the hill. Come on. Let's go for a walk. Put a coat on. It's cold out."

"I don't care."

I nearly laugh because it's not the reaction I expected. She's in my sweater and yesterday's jeans and doesn't want a coat. Doesn't matter. I put mine on her and do the buttons up myself. Good thing that she lets me. Outside, there's frost on everything and our breath goes up white in front of us.

We walk up the hill without talking. She keeps pace with me the whole way, close enough that her arm brushes against mine every few steps.

The plot is at the top, where the hill flattens out and you can see the river. Soon, a wide, massive headstone appears stark against the sky in black granite. On one side it says: *Laszlo Novak - Loving Husband*. On the right side: *Manon Novak - Devoted Wife*. Then underneath, *United in Life, Never Apart Again*. The entire thing is framed with decorative etchings and even a carved wreath at the top. I could have gone for marble, but durability is much more attractive. This headstone will stand the test of time.

"I'm going to add a stone angel on either side eventually," I murmured.

The wind moves the grass around the granite, and I don't need to touch anything. I don't need to straighten anything. Taking a breath, I let it out slowly, all the way down, which is a relief. My hands are hanging at my sides, relaxed. This surprises me.

The stillness of this place gets into me and my thoughts stop racing. The noise in my head is gone. The breaking and entering, the camera, the ear, my fucking desk, all of it. The calm seeps through me now.

I take Manon's hand and pull her a couple of steps to her side of the headstone, on the grass, facing it. Then I let go and take one step back, so there's a yard of distance between us. I want her to look at it for a moment.

She waits for me to say whatever it is I brought her up here to say.

“There are no birth dates,” she observes.

“Something for later…”

I see she’s no longer shying away from me. I close the distance between us after a while, and wrap my arms around her from behind.

"Do you remember what I promised you a few months ago?" I say into her ear. "On your mother's bathroom counter. Your dress round your waist. After I'd had my mouth on your pussy and left you right on the edge..."

She shivers, and I let out a low growl and drag my nose along her neck, letting the scent of her fill my head. Her breath catches.

She wants me to touch her. Nothing’s changed.

"You said—" Her throat moves as she swallows. "You said the next time I came, it would be here."

"On the grass, near your name. Loud enough to wake the dead." I straighten up and look down at her as she turns her head to me. Her pupils have gone wide. "I keep my word. You know that about me by now."

"I know."

"And I made you a different promise before that one." I take her chin between my finger and thumb and turn her whole body around to face me. "That first time we spoke, by the water. Do you remember?"

"You said you wouldn't touch me," she says after a pause, "unless I asked."

"So, ask me."

I let go of her chin and take one step back. I slide my hands into my pockets, so she knows I'm not going to reach for her. Whatever happens next either comes out of her mouth or doesn't happen at all.

It feels like forever, waiting for her to speak. Then she closes the distance between us, gathers a fistful of my shirt, and pulls me down to her mouth.

"Touch me," she says. "Now. Here."

Thank Christ.

I get my hand into her hair and drag her mouth up to mine. I don't kiss her softly. I've spent the whole night wanting to put my hands on her and not being able to. Now that she's asked, I take everything. She kisses me back the same way, and at one point she bites my lower lip hard enough that I taste blood. But I don't want her to stop.

Her hands slide up under my shirt. Her nails dig into my back and drag down, and she moans into my mouth, a sound that goes straight to my cock. I've got her coat open, off her shoulders and on the grass before I've thought about it. I walk her backward with my mouth still on hers until her back hits the headstone. She slides down onto the grass at its base, gets both fists in my shirt, and pulls me down with her.

"The ground's freezing," she says, breathing hard.

“Wait.” I lift her ass up and spread out the coat under her so she’s sitting on it. "You'll live now."

"Anyone can see through that fence."

"Then they'll see something worth getting out of bed for." I've got the sweater shoved up over her ribs. No bra under it. Her nipples are tight from the cold. When I put my mouth on one, she arches up off the ground. "Anyone walking over the hill this morning has other things to do, I’m sure. Turn over."

She looks up at me with her hair against the granite, her back pressed to her name, and says, "Make me."

I turn her, and she goes up on her hands and knees in front of the stone, jeans and panties shoved down to her thighs, and she gasps when the cold hits her. I put my hand flat on the small of her back and push until her chest is down, her ass is up, and her fingers are digging into the cold earth at the foot of the stone.

"Look at that," I say. "Right where I'm going to put you."

"Laszlo—"

"Quiet." I spread her open with my thumbs. She's soaked. Her thighs are wet with it already, and there's no way that started in the last two minutes. I lick her, one long stroke from her clit all the way back, and she jolts and swears into her arm. I do it again, then spit against her ass and work it in with two fingers, thinking about what it's going to feel like to push into her there. She's moaning already, begging me to fuck her, but I want to take my time. I push two fingers into her cunt instead, slow, all the way, until she moans louder.

"Say it," I tell her. "Out loud. Where anyone could hear."

"You know what I want."

"I want it in words."

"Fuck me with your fingers." Her voice is already wrecked. "God, like that. Don't stop."

I don't stop. Two fingers, then three, hooked the way she likes, and I spit again, higher, and work my thumb against her ass in slow circles until she's pushing back onto it herself, filthy and greedy and mine. When I press the tip inside she comes apart, screaming at the base of her own headstone, with dirt under her fingernails and my name in her mouth.

I push her head down into the grass, drop my pants, and take my cock in my hand.

Getting the jeans and panties the rest of the way off her, I throw them at the stone, then get an arm under her ribs and roll her onto her back. There is grass in her hair and dirt on her cheek. She blinks up at me, still shaking from the last orgasm as I settle between her thighs, a hand under her ass to tilt her up, and push my cock into her to the hilt. Her mouth opens. Her eyes go unfocused and then come back to mine. She moans my name, while I’m constantly checking if she's all right, that the ground isn't too cold under her.

I pull out almost all the way and push slowly back in, watching her face while I do it. Her chin lifts. Her eyebrows pull together, and her lips part on a moan. She's fine. She's better than fine.

She puts both hands on my face. They're cold from the ground. She holds me there, and I let her.

Then her heels come up and dig into the backs of my thighs, and I stop going slow. I fuck her hard enough that her shoulders slide on the grass and her hair catches on the base of the stone.

My hands get their fill of her. One under her, one along the side of her face. They’re steady, holding her, while this morning I couldn’t stop fidgeting. I straightened books, moved the candles, lined the mugs, gripped the counter until my knuckles went white. Nothing worked, but this is. Her face in my hand, her eyes not leaving mine on the cold ground. She's the only thing that has put me back inside my own body since I saw that ear on her nightstand. It’s neither the routine or the order.

It’s her. It’s always been her. It is always going to be her.

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# CHAPTER 28

Manon

This is filthy. It's dirty, and I can't breathe. I've already come at least four times on the patch of earth where I'm one day supposed to be buried, and I've never in my life wanted anything the way I want this. There's nothing hotter. Nothing. And the man doing it to me, Laszlo, my husband, is no longer the cold, unreachable thing he was a few hours ago.

I'm on my back now in the cold grass of my own grave with his sweater shoved up and his face over mine, close enough that I can't look anywhere else. He looks at me in this moment like I’m his entire world.

He pulls out slow and drives back in hard, then does it again, and again. He’s flush against me as I abandon myself to the feeling. I let it all out. I’m screaming. Screaming loud enough to wake the row of dead behind my head and the living on the far side of the fence, and I couldn't give a shit about any of them.

"Eyes on me, wifey," he rasps, his mouth an inch from mine. "You don't get to hide for this one. Look at your husband while he ruins you on this sacred ground."

So I look at him. His eyes are on me, unblinking. There's dirt on his cheekbone from my hand. Being seen like this is the part I can't stand, because I can't turn my head into my arm and hide from his scrutiny. He's watching me take him and I'm letting him. I'm coming again before I've

decided to, wrung out around him, and the pleasure turns vicious enough that for a breath it isn't pleasure at all. It's closer to grief. A sound tears out of me. He swallows it and keeps his eyes on mine the whole time, which is utterly unbearable.

"Yes," I try to beg. "Laszlo, harder." My throat's stripped raw from screaming and it comes out as a broken whisper, right against his lips.

"Manon, I'm going to give myself a cardiac arrest at this pace," he pants, and I laugh at that, up into his face with my hands in his hair. He grins down at me. "You're a menace. A genuine menace."

"You'd survive it," I gasp. "Your family owns the funeral home. It’s a trade discount."

He half-groans and half-laughs, and I feel it go through his chest into mine because there's no space left between us now. None. He slides a hand under the small of my back and tilts me up into him as he drives in deeper, faster, breathing so raggedly the doctor in me starts running a mental checklist for chest compressions while the wife in me tells her to shut up.

"I'm coming, *ma macabre*," he grinds out against my jaw. "Fuck."

And he does. He empties into me with a hoarse grunt, his forehead dropping to mine, his whole body going rigid and then shaking over me. I hold his face there and don't let him hide it, because I want to watch that too. My eyes sting. I feel the flood of him, hot, in a body that's freezing everywhere the ground touches it. So obscene and so perfect. He kisses me once, off-center and barely coordinated, then folds down over me, his weight pressing me into the coat and the earth.

I stay there under him, thoroughly and comprehensively ruined, his cum sliding down the inside of my thigh, the back of me freezing and the front of me warm, and my husband breathing into my neck like he's the one who nearly died.

The morning's almost gone. The sky is flat and gray, and the wind is picking up off the fields, dragging cold fingers across my bare legs. Laszlo is still in his black shirt, mostly a mess but at least clothed, whereas I'm in nothing but his sweater and starting to feel every mark he's left on me.

Around us the private graves sit in their neat rows, patient and unbothered. Not many. Just enough to feel watched.

"I want to ride you," I hear myself say.

Because apparently something's genuinely wrong with me. I never wanted it like this before. With Charles it was always soft, bland, careful, and now, with this maniac who does his best work on the dead, some switch has been flipped in me that I can't flip back. All I want is more of it. All I want is the ache of him, the force of him. The going-too-far.

He lifts his head and looks up at me, this powerful, terrifying man sprawled across a cemetery plot with grass in his hair. The sight is almost ridiculous. Then I see his cock already stirring, and a slow smile spreads over his handsome face.

"Such a greedy little *kwiatuszek*," he murmurs.

I have no idea what he just called me. But I climb over him anyway, ignoring the cold biting into my knees, and sink down onto him until he fills me completely. It’s too much...

"You're right about one thing," I breathe, rolling my hips and feeling every inch of the stretch. "You're too big, and I'm not going to be able to walk tomorrow."

He grins up at me like I've just told him a fresh body is being delivered on Christmas morning. His hands come up to my breasts under the sweater, thumbs dragging over my nipples, then pinching, and the small, sharp pain makes me clench around him so hard.

"You're soaking, *ma macabre*," he says, watching the place where our bodies meet with the same focused reverence he probably gives a difficult restoration. "And you can take it. Look how well your pussy grips me. Like it doesn't want to let me go." He tips his chin up, eyes half-lidded. "Now ride me before you freeze to death on top of the only man who adores you to death."

Those words shouldn't do anything to me. But they do everything to me. They make me do something wild and remove my sweater, leaving my body completely bare to the elements. To him.

I close my eyes and ride him, increasing the pace, chasing the drag and the fullness, and I keep going until we're both panting and the cold air scrapes my throat because I can't seem to get enough oxygen into my lungs. My thighs are burning. My head is light. It’s cold in the graveyard but the heat of him surrounds me, lights my insides in flames, and I don’t give a fuck. I abandon myself to the rhythm; the only option is to *feel*.

“Please, I wanna cum. I want to feel your cock all the way inside. Please. Don’t stop.”

He obliges by thrusting harder, and I see stars.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck!”

Laszlo slides an arm around the small of my back and lifts himself up so he can get deeper, and there's no space left between us at all. I lean down and we are chest-to-chest now. His mouth finds mine as he thrusts up into me.

His tongue slides against mine, unhurried, and the new angle drives him into a place inside me that makes my whole spine light up. Before I can take the next breath, that feeling starts again at the pit of my stomach, tingling through my core, and I’m coming once more, breaking apart on his lap with a broken sound swallowed straight into his mouth.

"That's it," he says against my lips, one hand fisted in my hair to keep my head exactly where he wants it. "That's it, *moja* Manon. Give me one more. I know you have one more in you. You always do."

"I can't," I whimper, still riding out the last of it. "Laszlo, I can't…"

"You can." He rolls his hips up in a slow, cruel circle that finds the exact spot again. "You're a doctor. You know precisely how much your body can take. And your body," another roll, another spark, "is telling me you're lying."

He's right and I hate him, and hate him some more. Soon enough, I come apart a fourth—fifth?—time. I shout out his name to the heavens, my scream resounding so that a couple of birds burst out of a nearby tree. He follows me over the edge a second time with a shudder and a groan pressed into my collarbone, holding me so tightly I couldn't fall if I tried. Both of us

are trembling, utterly finished, laid out as we are, obscenely across the plot of ground he bought so we could rot together for eternity.

For a long moment, neither of us moves. My cheek is against his temple. His heart is slamming under my palm. I could genuinely fall asleep here, on top of him, and I think that says something deeply twisted about the state of my psyche … and marriage.

Laszlo goes still beneath me.

"Manon," he says, and there's a thread of something almost like laughter under the calm. "I think we have a little audience."

I gasp and try to turn around, but my muscles are sore, and now the cold creeps in with a vengeance.

"We have a *what*?"

"Look to the left," he murmurs, one hand sliding up to press the spot between my shoulder blades, anchoring me. "Slowly. Toward the chapel gate."

I lift my head to look.

There, across the silvery rows of white headstones, standing just inside the little iron gate that leads up from the lane, are three old women, bundled in headscarves and heavy coats, each clutching a bunch of flowers to lay on some beloved’s grave at this hour. They're too far away for me to make out their faces. But I do know they’re so rigid, they’d pass for statues. I bet the last thing they expected to find were a couple of strangers copulating by the one gravestone that stands out among the rest.

"Oh my God." I scramble, grabbing for anything, finding grass and Laszlo's sweater and my coat somewhere behind me out of reach … and nothing else that will cover me. "Oh my God, Laszlo. There are three women…"

"There are." He sounds, if anything, delighted. He sits up with me still half in his lap, entirely unbothered, and lifts one hand toward the gate in a gracious, appalling little wave, as if he's greeting them at a garden party. "Good morning, ladies."

That's all it takes. The three shapes break apart at once and hurry back down the lane, coats flapping, flowers still clutched to their chests, moving at a speed that frankly, as a doctor, I find very reassuring for women their age.

"You waved at them." I'm getting my arms into his sweater and pulling it over my head, not quite managing to look at him. "You fucking waved."

But I'm not thinking about the women. They're gone, back to whatever village they came from, and I'll never see them again.

It's not them. It's me. It's the fact that I just came apart again and again on a grave in a public cemetery and screamed loud enough to send three strangers running. I let him talk me into every one of my orgasms. More than that, I begged. I don't beg. I'm the hard-headed one. I'm the one who stays level-headed and reasonable in a trauma bay with someone's heart failing under my hands. I don't do this. I've never once in my life done anything remotely like this.

And the worst part that actually makes my stomach drop is that I'd do it again in a heartbeat if he asked.

"They'll be fine. We just made their lives that much more exciting, I bet." He rises to his feet in one fluid movement, his wits about him, and pulls me up after him as though we've simply concluded a pleasant morning walk. "We're married. On our own land that we let the church use, visiting our own future accommodation." He drapes his coat around my shoulders and folds it shut over me with those lovely hands. "If anything, we're the most respectable couple in this cemetery. Everyone else here is dead and doing nothing productive with the space."

A laugh punches out of me before I can stop it, half horror and half delight. Damn.

This isn't me, I think, and then, right behind it, unbidden and horribly honest: *But it was the best sex of my life.*

That's the thought that scares me. What he's turning me into, one grave at a time.

"Come," he says softly. "You're blue. You'll make yourself ill, then I'll have to nurse you, and I'm extremely bad at being told what to do by your

immune system."

* * *

The house—which is very much like a cute, comfortable cottage—is nice and cozy and wholesome looking, which, after having sex in the graveyard feels like a culture shock. We’re both batshit crazy and besides, I'll be very surprised if we both don't come down with the flu. This was outrageous and ridiculous, and yet I can't help but smile.

Laszlo doesn't let me lift a finger. He steers me straight to the black and white bathroom, where he runs the bath, testing the water with the back of his wrist the way you would for an infant, adjusting the taps by tiny degrees until it's at the temperature he's decided I need.

Peeling the coat off my shoulders, then the rest of my clothing, he assesses me. Every mark, every graze, and looks at me with a mix of something like pride and guilt.

"In," he says.

I obey him this time without a word. The heat envelops me as I sit in the water, and a sound escapes me that's embarrassingly close to a sob. He kneels beside the bath and proceeds to wash the grass and dirt out of my hair, his movements slow and gentle. His hands, which have done unspeakable things to the living and tender things to the dead, are gentle on me now, and I decide not to think about how much I enjoy this.

Then he leaves me alone for a while, and by the time I'm clean and pink and half-melted, I can smell food.

It's official that my husband has cooked a meal. I can hear the sound of him moving around the kitchen, and when I come through wrapped in fresh underwear, shirt and leggings from my bag that he somehow managed to produce and place by the sink, hair damp against my back, there's a plate waiting for me. Real food. Scrambled eggs and buttered toast, something simple that my body needs, adorned with a sprig of parsley and arranged with the same care and order that he lives by.

"Sit," he says, pulling out the chair. "Eat. All of it." He sets the plate down. "You've burned about four thousand calories being stupid in those temperatures with me, and I'd rather not have you fainting at my table. Bad for business. A Novak, no less, losing a body indoors, over breakfast," he says with a wink. "People would talk."

And here's the thing that frightens me most: I like it. Not just the sex—though God, the sex—but *this*. The caring, the attention, the emotions, the frustrations, the funny bits… I was brought here into his world out of necessity, and here I am now, cozy and sore and comfortable in his kitchen. Deep down, I don't want this to end but this feeling terrifies me. He's so much easier to hate when he's insufferable or cruel, but here's the thing: he's never been cruel to me. His cruelty is all born out of a need to protect me.

"Stop looking at me like that," I mutter into my eggs.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm a body you did particularly good work on."

He considers this over the rim of his coffee. "That's the highest compliment I've ever got from you, Manon. You should write it down somewhere."

I laugh before I can stop myself. He salutes me by raising his mug, pleased with himself, and I'm still laughing when somebody knocks on the door.

We both turn in the direction of the sound. Laszlo frowns. He doesn't look alarmed, but I don't think he's told anyone our new location, has he? He does look puzzled. Setting down the coffee, he goes to answer it.

Two police officers stand on the step. The one in front looks young—pink face, crisp uniform, very green as he's clearly unable to hide his nerves. Behind him stands an older one, gray at the temples, heavyset, with the flat unbothered stare of a man who's basically seen it all.

"Morning, sir. Sorry to bother you." The young one has a notepad in his hand and looks like he'd rather be somewhere else. "We've, ah, we've had a report. About the cemetery, just up the lane."

"Oh?" Laszlo says.

"They heard…" the young one swallows "...screaming. The caller was fairly certain someone was being … that a woman sounded like she was being … murdered."

The words barely make it out of him. His ears are going pink to match the rest of his face, and I want to hide under the table. This isn't happening.

"They said it sounded like a woman being tortured." He glances down at his notebook, then makes a face as though he wishes he hadn't. "So we're just following it up. Making sure there's been no incident."

The older officer says nothing. He's looking past Laszlo, into the kitchen, at me, scanning me from head to toe. Whatever conclusion he reaches, I can tell he's decided he's going to make us say it out loud anyway.

"Miss," he says. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," I squeak, my gaze going left to right and down, directed anywhere but at them. I put a strand of still damp hair behind my ear. How could he have figured it out just by looking at me? I could die. I could lie down on this nice warm kitchen floor and simply die. This is the most embarrassing moment of my life.

From the corner of my eye, I spy my husband. Laszlo leans against the doorframe, entirely comfortable, in no rush whatsoever. He doesn't seem bothered or embarrassed. Why am I even surprised?

"No one's been murdered," he says. "You can tell your caller to relax. That was my wife. I bought us a burial plot up there, and we thought we'd try it out before we commit to eternity. She found the experience … very moving. What you heard was her showing her appreciation. At length."

The young officer's pen stops dead. Then the coughing starts, a sudden, desperate fit of it, like his own body is trying to rescue him from the conversation. His complexion climbs from pink to a deep, tragic scarlet, and the harder he seems to fight it the worse it gets, until he's bent slightly at the waist, hacking into his fist, entirely undone by a single sentence.

"She's a surgeon, my wife, a pragmatic type. Quite introverted," Laszlo adds, gesturing at me like this closes the case. "If I'd actually been killing

her, she'd have gone through the business of dying far more efficiently. No screaming. Very neat. Professional courtesy."

The older officer breathes out slowly through his nose. He wears the expression of a man who's given the best years of his life to this job and is now standing on a doorstep wondering why.

Neither of them has any idea who Laszlo is. That’s pretty obvious. They’ve just listened to this stranger, likely from out of town unless he’s a regular visitor here, who's happily admitted to having sex in a graveyard.

The young one is now staring at his boots, shoulders shaking, the odd cough still escaping him.

"Right," the veteran says eventually. "So, no one’s dead."

"No one’s dead," Laszlo agrees.

The younger officer, who's finally stopped trying to cough up a lung on Laszlo's doorstep, looks up at him, then at me, then up at the sky for a second, jaw working. Perhaps he's quietly asking God why this, why him, why today of all the days in the twenty-first century.

"That's a graveyard, sir," he says. "There are people's loved ones resting there, their grandparents and parents and spouses..."

"And now they've got something to talk about," Laszlo asserts with a nod.

That is it. Laszlo’s comeback finishes the young one off. He folds over and dissolves into coughing again, worse than before, hacking into his fist. Makes me think he might not make it off this visit alive.

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# CHAPTER 29

Laszlo

The room I use for interrogation is the smallest of the three prep rooms at the Basset house, another of my properties, an hour and a quarter from the Hudson Valley place, on a big private plot in Alpine, gated and set back from the road. It has the best drainage system and soundproof walls. A man can make as much noise as he wants down here and the bereaved sitting in the chapel upstairs will never hear a thing.

The guy Rafe pulled off Ferro's floor is strapped into the chair, and he's been talking for ten minutes without telling me anything. Before that, he was left alone for a half hour in this room to ponder his sins. I'm not in a hurry about it. It's not even two in the morning. My wife is working, so I have all night to get creative.

I line up the tools on the steel tray beside him. They don't need lining up, but it's an interrogation technique I've been perfecting for years. I like the small clean sound the metal makes, and the man sitting in front of me is not hard of hearing.

"Stop staring at the drain," I tell him. "I know it's interesting, but it’s distracting. It's one of the reasons why I bought the place, you know. Easier cleanup."

"Please. I don't know anything."

"You've said. Many times." I pick up the smallest blade, hold it to the light, set it back down a little to the left. "Here's my trouble. Somebody walked into my house. That same somebody stood next to the bed on my wife’s side, and left an ear on the dish where she keeps her rings. I wonder about the person who did that and how they know where exactly to place that item. We’ve established that you run errands for people who’d look for that information. So we'll sit here until you remember."

He wets his lips. "They'll kill me."

"They already did. They sent you into a room with me.” I turn the blade a quarter on the tray. "You didn’t have the key. Whoever had it and used it, it’s him I want. You were around when things were being decided."

He shakes his head. "I never met him. None of us have. He's not one of ours. They put him in a Ferro's coat and bring him in from outside for personal work, then he's gone."

"Outside where."

"Not from here. From the old country. That's all anyone says about him. We don’t go around talking about it."

The door opens behind me. I already know it's Rafe. He has that walk, heavy and slow, that announces his presence quite soundly.

"Well?" I straighten up and turn.

Rafe stays in the doorway with his coat still on, his phone in one hand, and keeps his voice down. "The ear. We've got a match."

"Whose?"

"Ours." He doesn't soften it. "Greg. He did the late runs to the crematorium, handled odd errands. He had a key to the side door, came and went at all hours, nobody thought twice about it. He went quiet on Tuesday and we figured he was drinking again." He paused. “They used him to get in, Laszlo, then they cut him up and kept the ear. The rest of him came back this afternoon through our florist on Ninth. Boxed up with some supplies we ordered."

The sound in the room dies. I stop hearing Rafe talking, the machines running. There's just the tray in front of me and my own heartbeat, even and steady when it should be pounding. This is exactly how I felt the day I killed Charles. My body went calm and my hands moved on their own. By the time I could hear the room again, he was dead.

I straighten the tray once more, but the tools rattle as I move my hand. Rafe sees it, and I'm glad he doesn't say anything.

"They turned one of my own men," I say. "They left their little present on my wife's pillow, then chopped him up and sent him back to me. Honestly, if they'd done this to any of the other families, I'd shake their hands. Devious…" I pick the tray straight again. "Greg has worked for me for six years and never once gave me trouble. A man like that doesn't sell you out for a bit of extra cash. Somebody had a real hold on him. I want to know who."

Rafe shifts his weight to the side, and that tells me I won't like the answer.

"He was drowning in debt at the Perrault card rooms in Jersey," he says. "They basically owned him. And the man who first brought him there eight months ago, the one who told them Greg was good for the money…" His expression hardens. "It was your brother-in-law. It was Julien."

Well. That's unexpected. And worrying.

Julien. Manon's brother, and my own brother-in-law, God help me. The same Julien who had to stay away after all the problems he's caused. Thanks to his shenanigans with Nicko, I got my wife, but that's beside the point. Julien should be rotting in a cell somewhere because his behavior is self-serving. He doesn't even care about his own family. But instead he is out and about, causing mayhem. Handing my enemies a key into my house.

"Find him and bring him in."

"Two steps ahead. He was easy to track down. He's at his family's lake house close by. I was just waiting for your go ahead."

"Then go get him."

Within a couple of hours, he’s here. Rafe and Tomek have him by each arm, and he's fighting them with every ounce of energy he’s got. His shirt's rumpled, half unbuttoned, and he looks like he hasn't slept in days. When he sees the man tied to my chair, his eyes widen in terror but he quickly hides it. Good, he should be afraid.

"Sit down."

"I'll stand." His voice comes out steady enough, but his hands give him away. He shoves them into his pockets, but there’s nothing casual about that gesture.

"You introduced a man called Greg to the Perrault card rooms."

"I play cards. I introduce people. Why, is that a problem now?"

"Greg gave the key to my house to the people who came in and left one of my men’s ears next to my bed. Where my wife sleeps. My wife, your sister. Then they killed that man."

The performance drops. For a flash moment I see the real Julien, who is twenty-six years old and in way over his head. Then the anger comes—better anger than fear. He starts to pace, and I let him for a while.

"That's got nothing to do with me. I’m not going to hurt my sister!"

"Sit down, Julien."

"That's my sister, and I'm the reason she's stuck with you in the first place, so don't stand there and act like I don't care what happens to her."

"I didn't say you don't care. I said you did something stupid that put her in danger. Those aren't the same thing, and you know the difference."

He stops pacing, and he looks like he’s swallowed a metal beam that’s tearing him up inside.

"You brought Greg to those tables. Isn’t he married to one of your cousins? That’s complicated but it makes sense that you’re acquainted… anyway, you told them he was good for the money. He wasn't. He lost more than he could cover, and the people who run those rooms don't write off debts. They collect in other ways." I keep my voice flat. "They found out he had a key

to my house and they used him. He let them in. Now he's dead, and my wife had to lay eyes on that thing on her nightstand. It all started because you wanted someone to play cards with."

He stares at me in disbelief. Or is it guilt?

"You didn't plan any of this. I know that. You're not smart enough to plan it, are you?" I know this is not a kind thing to say, but it’s the truth and tonight, my patience is running thin. "You were just reckless. You dragged a man with a gambling problem into a place run by people who eat men like Greg for breakfast, and you never once thought about what they might want from him. You just played your hand and went home."

"I didn't know. I didn't know any of that was going to happen."

"No. You didn't. And that's the problem, Julien. You never know. You just do things and leave other people to deal with what comes after. Your sister married me because of something you did without thinking. And now my house has been broken into because of something else you did without thinking. At some point you're going to run out of people willing to clean up after you."

He's quiet for a long time. His face is rigid but I can see his eyes are wet as he avoids my gaze. He’s working the whole thing out in his head, and it’s not looking pretty. His expression changes, and for a moment he looks exactly like Manon when she's understood something she doesn't want to.

Then his phone rings.

He grabs it without thinking and looks at the screen. His whole demeanor changes, and I know who’s just called him. Julien Valmont might not be allowed at family gatherings, but I never forbade Manon from making contact.

"Hey," he says, his voice comes warm and easy, a brother's voice. "No, no, you didn't wake me. Just chilling."

Across the room, in the presence of the man strapped to the chair, who’s gone incredibly quiet, Julien lies to my wife about where he is. I listen to Manon's voice coming out of the speaker, small and tired, asking her brother if he's all right. She doesn’t sound convinced he is, even when he

tells her he’s eaten dinner, and to stop worrying about him. At last, she has to leave to head to the operating theatre, and a wave of pride washes over me.

That’s my wife, handling business. Saving lives… being such a damn queen.

He hangs up. "She's still at work. Long shift."

"I know."

He shoves the phone into his pocket. "Are you going to tell her? About tonight?"

I don't answer him because I haven't decided yet, and also because I don't discuss my wife with anybody.

"You," I say to him. "You go back to the lake house tonight. You stay away from the Perrault rooms, and you don't take another meeting with anyone attached to Ferro's because next time they won't be selling you anything. They'll just put you in a trunk and send you back to your father in pieces." I pull my gloves off. "And no, you don't say a word about tonight to your sister."

"You want me to lie to Manon."

"You just did it beautifully. I'm sure you'll manage." Then I turn to Rafe because I’m done with this fool. "Take this one out," I tell Rafe, nodding at the man in the chair. "I want him able to talk in the morning. Keep him somewhere quiet."

Rafe gets him up and out through the back without a word.

Julien opens his mouth, then shuts it before turning and heading out, this time without an escort.

As if on cue, one of the boys comes down with a mop and I send him back upstairs. He'll wipe the middle of the floor and miss the rest.

So I do it myself. Bleach first, then hot water, then the whole thing over again. It's four in the morning and I'm on my knees scrubbing my own floor with my sleeves rolled up.

I keep thinking about Greg. I'll send money to his sister next week and make sure she never has to work again. That's between me and him, wherever he is. But what I keep seeing is somebody standing in the dark in my bedroom, and I still don’t know who that person was.

Then the door at the top of the stairs opens, and I hear footsteps coming down. It's Manon. I'd know her walk anywhere, quick and light on her feet. How long have I been down here, cleaning? Enough for her shift to end, I see.

"Down here," I call out.

She comes in with her coat over her arm and her bag on her shoulder, exhausted. Her hair is falling out of the hairband. She stops in the doorway and takes in the room—the chair with the straps hanging off it, the empty tray, the wet floor, the mop in my hand.

Any other woman would have turned round and gone straight back up those stairs.

"You said you'd give me a lift home," she says, “so I came to meet you here. Not sure how much sense that makes. I could have gone straight there.”

"I did say I’d take you home."

"You didn't say you'd be doing the cleaning." She smiles. She does that a little bit more these days.

"I don't trust anyone else. They'd do it wrong."

She drops her coat and her bag on the counter next to the metal sink, and sighs. Then she walks across the room, stops in front of me, and looks down at my hands.

"Whose blood is it?"

"Nobody you'll ever meet."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the one you're getting." I put the mop in the bucket. "How was your trauma call?"

"Twenty-six hours. Fuck I need a bed." She's still looking at my hands. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Show me."

So I hold my hands out and she turns them over under the light, pressing along my knuckles. She does it so nonchalantly. Nobody has ever looked at my hands to see if I'm hurt. If anything, they'd want to know what I've done with them.

"A person broke into our house. Our sanctuary," I explain. "That's what I've been doing down here all night. Dealing with that. It wasn't the one who was in that chair, but he's connected to whoever is."

"You'll find them." A simple answer, delivered with a certainty that should set my mind at rest.

"I know I will." I look into her eyes. "I'd like it to be sooner."

She lets go of my hands, then crouches down before I can stop her to examine a wet patch by the man's chair leg, one spot I haven't gone over yet. She licks her finger, reaches out and touches the patch.

"Manon, what are you doing?"

She stands up, her fingertips red, her gaze dark and heavy. Her mouth is slightly ajar, and fast, shallow breaths escape her lips, sounding like she's just come up ten flights of steps.

Fuck.

"Don't," I say.

She puts her hand flat on my chest and drags down my shirt.

"That area still needs cleaning. Do you know how long the rest of this floor took me?" I ask her, but she keeps smiling, rattling me.

"Probably a few hours, knowing you." She's swaying on her feet but apparently still has the energy to wind me up. "I could tell you missed it. Just want to rile you up a bit. It's my new hobby…"

Grabbing her wrist, I lift her hand off my chest and hold it out to the side, away from both of us. Then I reach past her and pull the strap off the arm of the chair. Of course she knows exactly what I was doing in here an hour ago.

"Take your clothes off," I demand.

"But Laszlo, we should go."

"Now."

She started playing this game, might as well finish it. My wife, who argues with me about everything, pulls her sweater over her head and drops it on the floor without a word. Then the rest of it. I watch her strip in my prep room at an ungodly hour, and I can’t wait to bury myself inside her.

"Turn round."

She turns round.

I bring her wrists together at the base of her spine and buckle the strap over them, then slide two fingers underneath to check it isn't tight. It isn't. She's been on her feet since yesterday morning and I'm not having her lose the feeling in her hands over this.

Then I lift her onto the prep table and step back.

My wife. Naked on my steel, hands strapped behind her back, and she’s not complaining. I look down at the blood stain on my shirt, then return to studying her, from head to toe.

"You're staring," she says.

"I've been staring at you for a long time. You're only just noticing."

"That's not funny."

"It isn't a joke." I grab her by the knees and push them wide, so I can easily see her pink swollen pussy glistening with arousal. Fuck, my cock is like granite. "Jesus, look at you. I haven't touched you yet and you're dripping on my table."

"Then do something about it."

She's soaked. It's running down the inside of her thighs onto the steel. She tries to close her legs, perhaps summoning some last shred of pride. I hold them open with both hands. She can't hide from me.

"You are a freak, you know that," I tell her. "If only I knew before that the sight of blood affects you like this…"

She bites on her bottom lip but says nothing. The deep flush on her cheeks are telling, though.

"There's something profoundly wrong with you, *ma macabre*." I crouch down between her legs, on the floor I mopped in bleach, and couldn't care less. "Thank the stars for it."

I shove my face into her cunt and she moans loudly, nearly bucking off the table. Her thighs clamp around my head. Laying my forearm across her belly, I press her flat onto the steel because she isn't running this tonight. She can't push me off. She can't get a fist in my hair, which she loves doing and I love more. She can do absolutely nothing but stay there strapped and take it like the good little wife she is.

"Don't stop. Don't you dare!"

I'm not stopping and I know exactly how she likes it. I lick her slowly, savoring it, right over her clit, again and again until her hips start chasing my mouth. Then I push my tongue inside her and fuck her with it while she praises God. She tastes like the sweetest honey. I move back up to her clit, harder this time, sucking it into my mouth until she's screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Look at me," I say.

She lifts her head. Her hair's stuck to her face and her eyes are barely open yet, from what I can see, filled with need and want. I want her to look at me that way for the rest of my life. Not with fear or caution like so many others do.

"Whatever you did down here," she says, "I don't care."

Her palms are flat on the steel behind her as she opens her legs wider. "I like it here," she says, as if she's confessing to herself more than to me.

I nearly lose my mind.

I suck her clit into my mouth and push two fingers into her at the same time, curled up the way she likes. She's so wet my hand's a mess, moisture down to my wrist. Her pussy clamps down and grips me so hard I have to work to move.

“*Ma macabre*, your pussy is wrecking my hand. Give it to me, baby. Give it to me now…”

I feel a tremor start deep inside her, and then her whole body locks. Her thighs shake against my ears. Her back arches right off the steel and she drags the table across the tiles with her “Laszlo! Shit, yes!” I keep my mouth on her the whole way through it, holding her hips down while she comes apart. She's soaking my chin, my hand, and the table underneath her.

Then she folds forward onto my shoulder and stays there—that's my wife done for the evening.

I hold her for a while, then reach over and get the strap off her. I check both wrists. There's a faint mark on the left one that'll be gone soon enough. I caress it.

She's got her forehead on my shoulder and her hands are already at my belt.

"No."

"Yes."

"Manon."

"You didn't come."

"I'm aware. I was here for it." I take her hands off me and hold them, which is so easy because there's nothing left in her. "Time for bed."

"I could suck you off in five minutes."

"You couldn't suck me off in five minutes if I paid you. You can’t keep your eyes open."

"They're resting."

"You'd fall asleep with it in your mouth." I pick my ruined shirt off the floor in a swift motion and put it round her shoulders. I can’t let her go or she’d fall off the table. "Arms."

"This is insulting."

"Arms, Manon."

She shoves her arms into the sleeves like a furious child, and I do the buttons up for her. She's asleep before I get to the third one.

I carry her up the stairs. She weighs nothing, and I worry. This woman is my life. She dies, I die.

I put her in the bed upstairs after taking her shoes off, deciding I'm not taking her home tonight. Then I check the door, the window, and watch her breathe. Tomorrow, we’ll see what to do. First order of business when we get home: change the locks and tighten security, make sure the bedroom is sorted.

Right now, I have things to do. I go back down and clean the room again, getting every single spot I missed on the floor, then the table, three times over. I'm still at it when dawn breaks, in the ruined shirt. I already know I'm never going to throw the bloody thing away.

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# CHAPTER 30

Manon

I have been married for going on nine months, and if someone had told me last year that I'd be hosting a dinner party like a proper trad wife, I'd have flipped them off. Sure, I've been in similar cozy events because of my family, but I've never been the damn host.

I'm braising lamb, and I don't even know why because Laszlo offered to bring in a professional chef or he'd take care of it himself. He's also given Dolores a day off. Then I decided I'd surprise him and do it myself, so there's that. Honestly, I don't even have to do all this because it's not going to be a lot of us. But I was in the mood.

The kitchen is a fucking mess. Fact is, I haven't cooked for anyone in a very long time, and it shows. This is his kitchen—his knives, his ridiculous system, and I've turned it upside down in twenty minutes. I'm drinking rosé and arranging the seared meat into the braising pot when Laszlo walks in.

He comes around the island, wraps his arms around my waist, and buries his mouth in my neck. I giggle like a schoolgirl. Damn it, when did we get this cozy with each other? It's so strange, these days I don't want to kill him at all.

"Can we skip the main course so I can get to the dessert and eat your pussy on this table, *ma macabre*?" he murmurs, dragging his nose down over my shoulder.

"Oh, stop that," I say, not very convincingly. "I'd say yes, but I don't want to disappoint Daphne. She's been having a hard time lately." He rolls my nipple through my top and makes it very difficult to care about the lamb. Laszlo has turned me into a sex-starved whore.

A moan escapes me while I try to concentrate, which is impossible with him poking me from behind with his enormous hardon. It's not like I'm deprived; we do this all the time.

And things have changed.

I'm not ashamed to admit to myself anymore that I'm in love with Laszlo Novak. God, I'm in love with him. I am.

I have not said those little words to him yet, and I'm not sure when or if I'll be able to get them out. I'm still processing all of this in my head because it's a big deal. How could I possibly love a man who stalked me for years, then practically forced me to marry him? Some might say it's a textbook example of trauma bonding, but it's been months and each day I've felt his devotion so strongly, I can no longer ignore how it makes me feel. For every infuriating act that drives me up the wall, he'd do something that makes up for it ten times over. That's my Laszlo.

*My* Laszlo.

I just cannot imagine life without him anymore. I cannot imagine living apart from this complicated, loving, caring, frustrating man...

"But your pussy is thirsting for it," he says. "I can hear it weeping for cock." His hand slides under my skirt and up my thigh. Right then, his phone goes off on the counter.

He lets out a curse and steps back, while I feel I could throw that damn phone in the pan.

"Constantine," he says. Whatever his brother is telling him, he doesn't like it much. "When? Fine, send him, but I want him to behave. I've got bodies downstairs. I don't want him bringing work into my home." He hangs up.

"Everything all right?"

"Constantine can't make it. Something's come up." He slides the phone into his pocket and comes back for my hips, his touch setting me on fire just like that, from zero to one hundred. "He's sending someone in his place so you're not a chair short."

"Sending who? It was supposed to be him, you, me and Daphne. Cozy."

"You'll see." He kisses my shoulder. "Finish the lamb. They should be on time."

“They?”

Lazlo smiles, then leaves without a word. Asshole.

While the meat cooks, I take a quick shower, change into a flowy but elegant dress, and go back downstairs to check on things. Daphne arrives a bit early like I asked her to, a relief because I want another woman in this house before it fills up with men. She comes in already talking, a bottle of gin in one hand, and hugs me hard enough to bruise.

She looks, as usual, like she took a wrong turn on the way to a magazine shoot—tall, red haired, perfect and fully natural. She told me her family were in the cleaning business, the legitimate sort of cleaning, not the type someone like my husband would ask for.

"It smells amazing and I'm starving. I brought something." She holds up the gin, then looks me over. "Has he fed you today, or are we starting on the wine?"

"Both. There's a bottle of red open."

"God, I love this house." She pours herself a glass the size of a vase and climbs onto a stool to watch me work. As I go about the kitchen, I tell her about the surgery I turned down to stand here in an apron, and she tells me I've lost my mind, which I have.

Then the bell goes again, and Laszlo answers it. "Rafe," I hear him say.

Daphne glances toward the corridor and frowns, spotting the tall, handsome Rafe looking toward the kitchen. After that incident in the club she told me to keep that awful man away from her, and I didn't press.

Oh dear. My husband has a death wish tonight, for Rafe.

Rafe fills the whole doorway with his long coat and large frame. He's wearing the face of a man who didn't want to be at a dinner party. Laszlo waits, because when Rafe turns up it's usually to tell him something, but Rafe just says, "Constantine sent me. Said you were short at the table." A pause. "Tomek's parking the car."

"It’s just an informal family dinner, but my brother insisted you be here since he couldn’t come, and you would only accept if Tomek also came," Laszlo says.

Rafe grunts in response.

He steps inside and finds me at the stove. "Manon." He nods to me, his voice low and careful. From Rafe, that's respect; he won't waste words proving it. Then his eyes travel to Daphne on her stool, and stay there a beat too long. The change in his body language is remarkable as he seems to freeze up. The air in the kitchen grows heavy, tension crackling in the space between them, and it’s like he can't take his eyes off her. She doesn't so much as glance at him.

"Wine's open, Rafe," I say. "Sit wherever you want."

"I'll stand,” he mutters, then says hello to Daphne and gets nothing back.

Daphne turns to me like the doorway is empty. "So I never finished telling you about the liver. Manon. The *liver.* You would not believe the size of it."

"Daphne—"

"Cirrhosis you could see from space. I nearly took a photo." She's louder now, cheerfully building a whole mountain out of a diseased liver. Rafe watches her talk so animatedly, and honestly it's the most patient I've ever seen a man be about being ignored.

Laszlo comes in and takes pity on him. He crosses to the counter, pours a glass of wine, and puts it in Rafe's hand whether he wants it or not.

"Drink that. You'll need it. Something stronger later." He nods at Daphne, then at me, without a shred of shame. "When they get going about the dead,

there's no stopping them. My wife married the trade and made a friend in it. You'll be lucky to say ten words all night."

"I don't need ten words," Rafe says, his gaze still fixed on Daphne.

"No," Laszlo says pleasantly. "I don't imagine you do."

Daphne lifts her chin and gets louder about her work misadventures. Then Tomek saves everyone by falling through the door.

"Sorry, that gate's a nightmare." Although flushed, he seems delighted to be here, holding a bunch of flowers with the gas-station sticker still on the wrapper. He pushes them at me with both hands. "For you. For the house. Thank you for having us, this is really nice … is that lamb? It smells unbelievable." He spots tall the goodies on the counter and beams like Christmas came early. "Are we allowed to drink? On a job? This isn't a job, is it? It's a dinner."

"It's a dinner, Tomek." Laszlo sighs.

"Great." He drops into a stool and picks up an olive. "So, what else are we having?" Rafe is still being ignored, but I’m not sure Tomek is reading the room.

Laszlo catches my eye and I have to turn back to the pan so nobody sees me laughing.

I get the lamb onto the dining table with all the beautiful vegetables around it. I also add a big salad bowl, fresh garlic bread, seasonings and butter. The whole spread does look amazing. Laszlo has already set the table. For a while, it's just about passing dishes around. Tomek keeps asking me if he can get more and I urge him to eat as much as he wants. I cooked for an army because I have no idea how to calculate portions.

Daphne is shoveling food in like she hasn't eaten in a week, which, knowing her, she probably hasn't. Work has a way of making her forget mealtimes. I don't say a word when she tops up her wine for the fourth time. She's flushed, loud, and laughing at everything.

Laszlo's next to me with his arm along the back of my chair, and I spend half the meal watching Daphne and Rafe instead of eating, because it's pure

entertainment.

Laszlo leans in. "Here's the thing about Rafe: he’s clueless about women. Barely notices them. On Constantine's birthday, a stripper sat in his lap. He moved her off him like she was an inconvenience and went back to his beer."

I shake my head at that, and it’s so hard not to burst out laughing. Daphne’s spent the whole evening angled away from Rafe like he's contagious. Then the wine gets into her and her chair creeps sideways, one small scrape at a time, until she's telling one of her stories with lots of hand gestures and drops one of her hands on his forearm. She's probably feeling him up because as weird as he is, he’s quite a snack—and Daphne’s not blind.

Rafe goes rigid, and his eyes drop to her hand like he can't quite believe it's there.

Everyone at this table knows Rafe doesn't let anyone touch him. Ever. I don't know his history, but Laszlo has mentioned it once or twice. Now Daphne has her palm flat on his forearm, and he doesn't shake her off. He doesn't move at all, especially when her fingers twitch and move in what’s suspiciously like a caressing motion. He just sits there with his eyes on her hand, jaw twitching, and I have to lean in to figure out whether he's breathing.

"You're so *solid*," Daphne tells him, delighted, patting his arm like she's testing a melon. "Isn't he solid? Manon, feel his arm."

"No, thank you."

"There's something else you could feel under the table," Laszlo whispers in my ear, and I nearly choke on my wine.

Daphne isn't listening to anyone. She's got both hands wrapped around Rafe's arm now, squeezing along it. "Is all of you this big?" she asks, her voice slurred. Then she points at him, wide-eyed. "Don't. Don't answer that." She drops her head onto his shoulder, thoroughly pleased with herself. "I'm not even sorry."

Rafe sits perfectly still and lets her use him as a wall, or the back of a sofa.

Tomek is in heaven. "Next time," he says, mouth full, "I cook for you. Trad Polish. *Bigos.* It’s a hunter's stew, you cook it for four days." He points his fork at Rafe. "Rafe loves it. He always steals an extra portion."

Rafe grumbles something incoherent to the table.

Under the table, Laszlo's hand slides onto my thigh, and he's exploring slowly, higher, while he asks Tomek about the traffic on the way over. I take a mouthful of wine, trying not to moan when his index finger brushes over my sex. I feel small beads of sweat tingling on my brow. Yes, I'm turned on and wet for him. We didn't have sex last night because I was working, and he was busy all morning.

"You're going to make me spill this," I say quietly.

"No one will care." His voice doesn't change at all.

“No one. Are you sure?” I tease. He knows what I mean.

"Tell them you need something upstairs. Two minutes. I'll follow."

"We have guests."

He looks around the table. Daphne now is more or less wearing Rafe like a coat, while Tomek is waxing lyrical about his favorite stew to Rafe, who pretends to listen but is off in his own happy world. "We have a woman trying to climb inside my enforcer and my youngest man yapping about food," he says against my ear. "Nobody at this table is going to notice we're gone. Rafe wouldn't notice a raging fire right now, except the one going on inside him, I’m sure."

I suppress a chuckle, covering it with my napkin, and his hand slides under the hem of my panties. I press my knees together, locking his fingers on my wet pussy.

"After dessert," I manage.

"Ahh, *ma macabre*, you wound me." He doesn't move his hand.

Ten minutes later he finally does, when I remind him about the cake. Dessert is the one thing he wouldn't let me near for this dinner. He gets up, taps Rafe on the shoulder, and the man is out of his chair before I can blink,

desperate for a reason to escape the warm but unfamiliar weight of Daphne against his side. "Kitchen," Laszlo says. "Come help me with something."

"It's *makowiec*," Tomek tells me, glowing, as the two of them go through the door. "Poppy seed cake. It's his father's recipe. He only makes it for special occasions." He considers this. "He's never made it for me."

Daphne has slid into Rafe's abandoned chair and is resting her cheek on the table. "I feel amazing," she informs the salt. "I feel like crying. This is the best night I've had all year." She turns her head without lifting it. "Your husband is loaded and he can cook. Where do I get one?"

"You don't need one. Trust me on this. Drink some water."

"I want one. I've been on my own too long, Manon. It's tragic." She sighs into the tablecloth.

"And that one next to me was so warm. His arms were so nice. Did you feel his arms?"

"At the club you wanted him dead," I remind her.

"That was different," she says, with total conviction, to the salt.

Shaking my head, I go to the kitchen for ice, since there's none on the table.

Laszlo and Rafe are still in there with the cake. The door's open a few inches and I've got my hand on it to push through when I hear Laszlo's clipped voice, nothing like how he's talked all night, and the tone stops me in my tracks.

"It needs longer than that," he's saying. "Poppy seed goes bitter if you rush it. My father would have taken the tray off you."

I hear the water running, then Rafe says, "The brother. You still want it all gone, or are we keeping it?"

"It stays where it is."

"Seven years of it, Laszlo. If anyone ever went looking."

"No one goes down there." A drawer slides shut. "It all stays at the Basset house. The paperwork, the tape, everything. I moved it all there even

though I should have burned it years ago. I should have done it before the wedding." A short sound, not quite a laugh. "Sometimes I go there and go through the boxes instead. A trip down memory lane…"

"And her brother's file?"

"Especially that. We want it only as leverage in case he pulls another one like he just did with Greg."

I stand there with the empty glass in my hand. His voice—I don't like it. It gives me chills.

A file. A tape. What tape? My mind goes straight to Charles and the tape he said he had, and my stomach turns over. That was all about Julien, and because of that I rushed to him on the day of my wedding, so I could save my brother's ass one more time. Since the body was taken care of, along with his possessions including his phone, I never gave it much thought after the incident.

Now this. What does he mean about Julien and leverage? Who is Greg? What else did Julien do? So many questions…

Laszlo had watched me for years before our wedding—he admitted as much, and I think I've gone past that and forgiven him. But now I want it to stop. I know he wants to protect me, but my brother's off limits, and I'm responsible for him because I'm the elder.

Now I'm also wondering what else he's hiding. What's at the Basset house? Pictures of me? Notes? And what about the tape? I'm assuming it's the one Charles had a copy of, but what if it's not?

My heart sinks.

I have a key to the Basset house. He gave it to me after we stayed there that night when he had me like he wanted me, screaming his name on the steel table. He told me I could come when I pleased and spend time with him when he was there. How soft and caring…

"Manon?"

He's in the doorway with the cake in his hands, poppy seed spiraled through it dark as a bruise, smiling at me. Easy. Warm. My husband, not the one with something to hide.

"I came for ice," I say in an even tone. "And to warn you Daphne's about to propose to your chair."

Laughing, he kisses me on the temple on his way past with the cake. I fill the glass, carry it back to the table and sit down next to him. When it’s my turn, I cut the *makowiec* and taste his father's recipe. Everyone agrees it's the best thing they've ever tasted, but I cannot down more than a single bite.

Tomorrow, he has meetings until the evening.

Tomorrow, I'm going to the Basset house.

* * *

Laszlo confirms at breakfast that he has meetings until late. Kissing the top of my head, he told me not to wait up. I said I might pick up a shift. How good I've gotten at lying to my husband during our morning routine. I’m not sure I like it.

I love him. That's what makes this stupid. Nine months ago I'd have sought a reason to run, but now I'm going to see everything with my own eyes, hoping to find nothing so I can come home tonight, get into bed beside him and let it go.

I go in the back, where the work comes and goes. The place is busy with the everyday business of a mortuary, but not overwhelmingly so. It’s just a skeleton staff, from what it appears. It is easy to avoid them and stick to the unoccupied areas as I come in from the yard in the back. I’m not sure if anyone saw me but I’m doing my best to stay out of anyone’s way. If they do see me, they know I’m the boss’s wife. I can walk in and out whenever I please.

The office is empty. There's a board with keys hanging on it behind the desk, each one tagged—CHAPEL, STORE, GARAGE—and one on the bottom hook with no tag. I take it. So I’m going to a room in the back on

the top floor as that seems to be the most likely one. I try the key on a few doors as I walk down. No dice. But when I stop at the one I'm thinking, the key turns.

I go in and turn on the light. There are boxes stacked all around. This whole room is filled with things that involve me. No surprise with that. But it's overwhelming to see *so much* here. It points to an obsession that maybe I never deeply considered.

The boxes are marked by year, in the same hand that leaves me sweet notes on my to-go coffee cups. I open one. Reports: where I went, when, who with, what I bought. Photographs—so many of them! Me drained after a night shift. Me and Charles walking down the street. There are photos of me sleeping—what the fuck! Then the badge I'd once lost, which takes me aback.

I keep looking through various boxes. More of the same. My heart races as I keep going, looking at my life in images, on paper, and remember things I've forgotten over the years. No stone has been left unturned.

My attention is drawn to a smaller box sitting on the desk. I open it to find a hard drive, a USB, and a file tabbed with Julien's name. I put my hand on that file and rest it there. With Julien, we've never been close as we took different paths in life. That doesn't mean I don't care. Hell, I married a fucking stranger to keep my idiot brother alive. I'm just sick of being manipulated by these men in my life—my father, my brother, my husband. I'm either fixing their messes or being pushed into their fantasy of how I should be. They can all go to hell.

I don't open the file yet because in this moment I don't want to see how rotten my baby brother truly is. I just want to be angry at Laszlo.

I keep going. More of the same. And oh my God, he's put some of my pictures in scrapbooks, like he's a parent keeping track of his kid's progress. I can't believe it. As I'm closing what I think is the last box, I spot one tucked way in the back between two cabinets. It's not tagged and looks older, like something forgotten. I pick it up and place it on the desk near the one with Julien's file. It has a lid like an oversized shoe box.

When I open it, I find only a few sheets of paper I can't make sense of, and a photograph.

I lose the ability to move for a beat. I don't understand what I'm looking at, only that it all feels like I've missed a step in the dark and stumbled face-first into a wall.

I know the person in the image. I call her mom.

I slide the picture closer. It's her, young, twenties maybe. She's laughing with her whole body, a laugh from the gut, head tipped back, one hand half-raised like she's trying to stop whoever's making her do it and failing. Leggings, a loose sweater falling off one shoulder. Her hair is down and everywhere, and she looks like a girl I've never met. Not the careful woman who folds napkins into perfect triangles and lowers her voice when my father comes into a room. This one looks like she's never been afraid of anything.

There's a dark-haired man with his arm around her, a handsome one who in some ways looks like a slightly younger version of someone I see every day, someone who's fucked me well and good over a gravestone, though that person got most of his looks from his mother...

I know that face, too.

I shook his hand at my wedding. I let him kiss my cheek. I watched him cross the room later and take my mother's hand in both of his, and I watched her pull it back too fast. I filed it away as unimportant. I'd forgotten all about it before the cake was cut. Before all that, years before, I saved that man's life.

Kazik Novak isn't looking at the camera. His attention is fixed on my mother like nothing else exists.

My hands aren't quite steady when I turn the photo over.

*Elise,*

*I'll wait for you. However long it takes. Don't let your father choose our life for us. What we have is ours. Not his.*

*K*

I read it several times over. The paper's curling at the corners, but the image and the ink have stood the test of time. Whoever wrote this meant every word, and whoever kept it … why did they do that? And why keep it here, with all the stuff about me?

I try to make sense of the handwritten message. Him. Who's him. Her father? His? Was my grandfather, back then, deciding for her in the same way our kind of families often do? Mine decided for me nine months ago in a garden, or maybe, he simply didn’t contest my offer to be a sacrificial lamb.

There was never any indication that my mother had ever personally met a Novak. In fact, she told me she wasn’t acquainted with any of them. That the Novaks only dealt with my father, and only when necessary. It seemed that our families sort of … tolerated each other. Why and how this was so, she left that business to the men. Socially, the two families circled each other and nothing more. Of course she was lying, feeding me the line that talking about rival families was beyond her scope and she would rather stay in her lane.

My heart races and pain stabs at my heart. Why does everyone hold so many secrets, including my own mother? Sure, I can’t say I’ve spoken to her as much as I should have in recent years. Between my demanding career and the fact I wanted to stay away from the family drama, time just slipped by. But there’s always been love between us. There’s always been trust.

She lied to me. Not the way my father lies, with some kind of agenda. She lied because she’d hidden the part of herself that came before the story she wrote with my father. Especially the part that broke her or meant anything at all. She never let any of that in a sentence with me, her dearest daughter. A lie by omission…

Something turns over and flips all the way around deep in my belly. It’s not anger yet. It's closer to grief, and I don't know who it's for—her, me, or the laughing girl in the sweater who had clearly lost that special spark.

I stare at that photograph, I’m not sure for how long. Then, I put everything back the way I found it—everything except the photograph, which goes in my coat pocket; and the USB, hard drive, and Julien’s file, which go into my bag. I turn off the light and leave the room. After hanging the key back on its hook, I leave the house and drive home, with one glaring question I’m going to ask my husband.

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# CHAPTER 31

Laszlo

Today was an excellent day. Business was bustling. Manon had a short shift, and after the week we'd both had, we deserved a proper dinner so I decided to make something special.

My father taught me how to make pierogi by hand, so I spent the rest of the late afternoon in the kitchen, feeling like it was Christmas morning. The Polish beetroot soup, *barszcz*, has been cooking on the stove since four. Sour cream in the white dish, dill on top. I set the table, straightened up everything twice, and now I wait for her car.

She finally arrives at ten past eight. I heard her putting the keys in the bowl. Then nothing—she doesn't drop her bag, doesn't come in complaining about the drive home. I leave the dishes and go to see what’s wrong. She's standing in the hall with her coat still on.

"Come sit down, *ma macabre*," I start. "I've got something special—"

"No," she says, unmoving. "You sit down. We need to talk."

Whatever's on her face gives me pause. I've seen my wife furious. This isn't that at all. I turn off the burner under the soup on my way to the table, because I have a feeling none of us is going to have an appetite afterward.

I take a seat. Manon pulls something out of her coat, lays it on the table, and slides it to me. I sneak a peek from the corner of my eye and my mouth

goes dry. Of course I know what this is. I tell myself there is no need to panic. This whole thing can be straightened out.

It's a very old photograph of Manon's mother and my father, taken over four decades ago before either of us existed. As I stare at it, the blood starts pounding in my ears. How did she find this picture? It's supposed to be hidden, out of her reach. Now it's on my dinner table, next to the sour cream.

"Where did you get this?" I ask calmly.

"I went to the Basset house today. You gave me the key." She brushes her hair away from her face then takes a seat across from me, on the edge of the chair, her coat still on. "I heard you and Rafe in the kitchen the other night. You were saying something about the tape my brother's on, the one Charles had. Talking about leverage. So I went and looked. By the way, I have the stuff relating to Julien. I'll take care of it myself. You know what they say about if you want to have something done right…"

"I see." There's a roaring in my ears, and my heart is pounding way too fast as dread washes over me. I thought I'd never have to have this conversation, but the Devil wants his due. "About the leverage I mentioned—"

"I found all of it," she interrupts. "The boxes filled to the brim with information about me. God, you even had the badge I'd lost. And so many, many, many photos. You printed them all. You put some of them in scrapbooks with cute little handwritten notes. I knew you'd been watching me but I've never seen such dedication, such organization. Impressive." Her voice is so level, and that's the scary part. It's the disappointment under each word that kills me. I can't fucking stand it. "That's not why I'm here though."

She puts one finger on the photograph.

"This photo disturbed me the most, for obvious reasons. Her name's on the back, Laszlo. My mother's, in case there was any doubt. And that's your father." She looks up. "I want to know what is going on. You need to explain it all, and don't you fucking dare leave anything out. After all these years you've been fucking with me, I deserve that much."

Her tone leaves no doubt either. The message is loud and clear: this is the end of our lives together, as a couple who’s maybe building something good. The end of us, the end of her looking at me the way she does, the end of this beautiful creature understanding me the way no one else ever has. I've talked my way out of everything my whole life, but there's nothing to say here that would make this smaller or kinder. There's only the truth I and everyone involved have kept from her.

"They were engaged." My voice doesn't sound like mine. "Your mother and my father. Before the way things became."

Manon lets go of a small laugh, then shakes her head. She doesn't believe me, so I carry on talking.

“Our families came over a year apart. My grandfather and yours arrived in New York with nothing to their names. Both ended up working the docks. By the time they’d made any real money, they were fighting over the same piers. That’s where it started. Before your father, before mine. Before either of us was even born.” I run a finger along the rim of my glass. “Eventually, the old men got tired of fighting and divided up the territory. Mine took the East River docks. Our fathers inherited the truce, along with the grudge. Kazik and Henri were the same age, learning the same business on the same waterfront. They drank in the same bars. For a few years, they were almost friends.”

“And then my father fell in love with your mother. Kazik and Elise were supposed to get married.” A pause. “Your father put a stop to that. He wanted her, and he wanted the East River docks, and he figured out how to get both. He paid someone to doctor photographs of my father with another woman. Made them convincing enough that no one would question them. Henri knew Elise through my father, so when those pictures showed up anonymously, she turned to him. He made himself indispensable. Gave her a shoulder to cry on. The man she could trust. She stopped answering Kazik’s letters, and eleven months later, she married Henri instead. Elise came from a poor family. Henri promised her the world…” I swallow and take a quick sip of water. “And she became a Valmont.”

“My father fell apart. Barely left the house for the better part of a year. He drank, neglected the business, and while he was busy drowning his sorrows,

your father made his move on the East River docks. By the time Kazik sobered up, the Valmonts controlled every pier my grandfather had fought for. That was Henri’s wedding present to himself.”

"That's not possible," she says. "Someone would have told me. I suppose my mother let me go through with this wedding because my father asked her to be okay with it. But he knew… and he did not object."

"He didn't object because doing so would have cost him Julien, and your father has always been very clear about which of his children he can afford to lose. You chose your path in life, away from the family. He had to protect the family at all costs." I make myself hold her eyes. "But your mother had no idea. She knew her own past, her own story, not that it had anything to do with the man across the aisle. As far as Elise understood, you were marrying a Novak to keep your brother breathing. An ugly bargain, but a clean one, and your father let her believe that cruel coincidence. So she had nothing to warn you about. She never knew the truth, that this was never chance, that I'd been coming for you for years and simply used your brother as the door. Nobody told her that. They only told me."

She looks down at her mother laughing in the photo and goes quiet for a long moment. Letting it sink in. There’s no way to make this less painful, for both of us. I fucked this up. I should have told her when we got married. I loved her then, but I was a coward.

"My father tried to reach her," I say. "He wrote to her, more than once. Every letter came back unopened. Probably Henri had her do that, or intercepted them somehow before she even saw them. After that, he never said her name again—not until he was in danger of dying, seven years ago." Might as well answer the question that’s probably on her lips right now: “He told me a lot then about his first love, unburdened himself, believing he’d go meet his Maker soon. He wanted to come clean and let me know he’d come to love my mother over the years… Of course he didn’t know about Henri’s trickery. That was something I found out, on my own.”

A wave of loathing fills me for the one man who started it all. The only thing keeping it from consuming me is the presence of the woman in front of me.

“My father has always wanted to see me married, happy with a good wife,” I continue. “Not everyone in this life is always ruthless, I suppose. At the core, we want the same things as everybody else… Then he didn’t die.”

"Because I saved him."

I want to gather her in my arms and hug her, but I don’t have the right now. She can probably put two and two together already because she’s the smartest person I know.

"Yes, you did. The irony. This brilliant resident fought for another human being and got her way." My throat goes dry as I speak. "I told you, my obsession began when I found out who you were. It was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. In part, I wanted to get back at Henri Valmont. Your family, your fucking father, needed to be taught a lesson." My throat constricts, and I swallow hard. “Your mother had no way of knowing I'd engineered the whole thing, or that it went all the way back to her. I wanted Henri to suffer for stealing what wasn’t his. The fact I couldn’t let go of you was another thing … I couldn’t help it. I wanted you, always you."

"Laszlo." She's frowning now, her eyes narrowed. "Tell me that Julien being in that club that night, doing what he did, wasn’t because of you. Please tell me you didn't set it up for your cousin to be beat up like that."

Her eyes are filled with tears and I want her to take the biggest knife in this kitchen and slice my chest open. She needs to let me bleed. Fuck, I need to suffer. I could lie to her. God, I could create a perfect lie that will allow her to sleep peacefully at night, but I can't. I laid my own fucking bed and I have to lie in it.

"I’m not saying Julien isn’t a shithead,” she flinches at my words, “and that he didn’t commit his own gruesome sins, but that time I paid Nicko a handsome sum to goad your brother until he snapped. Then I told him to never tell anyone, and I’d make sure he’d never want for anything." Each word costs me something I won't ever get back, and my vision goes lightly blurry. I need to squeeze her one last time. "I knew he'd snap. Julien has a bad temper. I planned this—a Valmont beating the shit out of a Novak on our turf, in front of witnesses. That's a death sentence in our world. That

was all I needed… Julien forced to leave his precious family and you in my hands.”

I can’t hold the bitterness in my voice, not just because I loathe the Valmont patriarch, but because I fucked up the best thing that ever happened to me. My beautiful Manon. “Henri Valmont was done for."

Her hand comes up to her mouth and more tears spill down her face.

"I didn't bank on the fact that Julien would play dirty and use his knife. Yes, I knew he wasn’t that honorable but I figured he wouldn’t be that damn thickheaded. Nicko was in more trouble than I bargained for. He’s lucky to be alive. I sat in that hospital and felt numb. I know I have to take care of him for a long time.”

I need water, so I take a long gulp of it. I crave more, but the glass is empty and I can’t stop talking now, sealing the coffin of this marriage. “So it did go downhill but my plan was set in motion that night. Everything you saw when you came in was for show, all planned. Your brother, the most pathetic one of all, made things easy. You believed you had minutes to save your brother, and so did he. My men let you through the gate because I told them to. Then I boldly asked you to marry me in exchange for his life. I waited seven long years for that opportunity, Manon, and it happened exactly as I thought it would."

She wipes her face and gets up. The chair makes a scraping sound. She starts pacing around the kitchen, and I wish she would scream at me or attack me with a scalpel again. This whole thing would be less painful.

"Why?" she asks.

*Because I wanted you. Because you give me life in a world filled with death.*

I drag my hand through my hair, then release a breath. It's true. I wanted her. I was drawn to her the first moment I saw her on those hospital stairs, even though I had no clue who she was then.

She’s asking for everything now, so I keep on giving. I must give her the whole truth, not just the nice bits.

"Because your father took the woman my father loved," I say, "so I took his."

"I was a pawn in this revenge game then," she says. She sounds so resigned, not even a hint of disbelief in her tone, as though she couldn’t possibly expect better from me.

"It stopped being about him a long time ago. I told myself it was, that I was owed something, that his ruin gave me the right to you… when the truth was, I wanted you from the first time I saw you, and I created all the justifications in the world for my desire so I'd never have to admit this. But I'm saying it now. Somehow, everything got tangled together."

"Stop." Her hand lifts to halt my barrage of words. I’m almost grateful as I’m set on hanging myself. "Let me think."

I already know what’s going on in her head because it’s the source of all of my nightmares.

"If you hadn't set my brother up, he'd never have gone after Nicko. There'd have been no reason for me to come to your house that night. No reason for any of this." Her voice gets lower with every word. "I'd never have married you. And I'd never have gone to the rink that morning to say goodbye to Charles. And he wouldn’t have lost his mind. And he wouldn’t be dead."

"Manon."

"You didn't just take my life away from me." The look in her eyes is worse than hate. It’s something infinitely darker. "You took his, too. Charles is dead because of you, and you made me believe it was to protect me."

I open my mouth to answer her. For once, there's nothing there. No words at all.

"You made me love you." She’s losing her composure now, and I can’t bear to see the pain in her eyes. "You were good to me, earned it day by day. I’ve overlooked so many things because of the way you treat me. The way you look at me and take everything I give you, good or bad. You put me on a pedestal, worshiped me. That's the part I can't forgive. I’ve fallen in love with you. All of you, from the serious things to the funny things to the way you make me feel when you … when you…”

She turns away, giving me her back as though she can’t bear the sight of me. “I stopped counting the days until the year was up, so I could ask for a divorce. I stopped being someone else and became myself when you were around." She's crying now, quietly, but doesn’t try to hide it. Rather, she turns so I can see everything. "I was going to stay, Laszlo. For good. I was going to tell you tonight."

I'm out of my chair, the weight of what I’m losing now an instrument of torture. She can’t love me and decide to leave me. "Then stay. You can still—"

"No." She shakes her head. "I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. Do you understand that? More than Charles. More than the life I built to get away from men like you. And you're the one who killed it. Not my father or your father, but you. Henri decided for someone else, once. You decided this for us. You took the one pure thing we could have had and tainted it. You manufactured every piece of it, my brother, the garden, the proposal, and let me fall in love with something I never got to choose. And Charles is in the ground because of it. My God, how far would you have gone if I hadn't gone to Basset House today?" Her voice goes flat, her tone final. She's delivering a message to the patient that there's nothing more medicine can do, minus the compassion. "There's nothing left in me for you, Laszlo. You made sure of that yourself."

The final blow hits me with blunt force. She might as well have swung a baseball bat at my head and crushed my skull.

I go down on my knees in front of her. The pain in my chest turns to a blade, twisting, and my heart is slamming so hard the whole room tilts around me. I'm on the floor, ready to beg, ready to do the one thing Laszlo Novak would never dream of doing.

I'd carve my heart out of my chest and lay it in her hands if she asked me to, because there's nothing living inside it but rot and her name. And if she walks through that door, she may as well have my men bury me alive, because there is no life after this one.

Without her, I'm nothing. Without her, I'm no one at all.

"Then finish it," I say. "You want to make this even? Make it even. Kill me. "One of those chef's knives will do it. Just give me a moment to make sure you won't get in trouble for it. My men can call it a break-in. It will be easy. You'll be free. You'll have enough to keep on working or retire. It ends with me, all of it, everything I did to you. I will spend eternity on the other side of life. Put me there. I'm asking you."

"Stop it."

"Manon—"

"Stop. You're making a fool of yourself. This is not you." She steps around me. "You don't deserve to be saved by me, and I won't dirty my conscience so you can have it your way. That's the one thing you don't get. Not this time."

I hear her footsteps going upstairs, to our bedroom.

I know she's packing her things. My body is not mine anymore and I'm about to be sick. She's right. I'm making a fool of myself. After a while, I stand, but I'm rooted to the spot. The pierogies have gone cold. I'm in my home but everything feels alien, as if I don't belong.

She comes down with the bag. She's put her coat back on. She stops in front of me, and for one second her hand comes up like she might touch my hair, then it doesn't.

"Don't have anyone follow me," she says. "If any part of you ever loved me instead of trying to own me, you'll let me get in that car by myself."

I hear her take the keys off the hook, and she walks through that door. Her engine comes alive, then the sound of her car going down the drive and out the gate grows smaller, until there's nothing.

I don't know where she's going. Maybe her old place, though there's nothing to go back to, I own that building, and I had her moved out months ago. For so long, I've always known where she was. All it took was a report, a phone call, a picture, a man watching from across the street. Now there's no one out there but me, and I just let her drive away without following. For the first time since I found her, I have no idea where she might sleep tonight.

I sit on the floor of my beautiful house until my legs go numb. Then I get up, pour a shot of Soplica, and I don't straighten the bottle after. I sit in front of the soup and pierogi nobody's going to eat, drinking the liquid fire.

Some hours later, my phone lights up on the table.

One message. Her name.

*I’ll send for the rest of my things later. I want a divorce.*

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# CHAPTER 32

It's been a month since I left Laszlo and ended my marriage, and I still can't sleep in my bed without making sure that all my doors are locked.

The door to my house is like the door to my mind—I can’t get them to myself again, they’re wide open and exposed to the elements. There’s nothing around me that I can control.

In any straightforward divorce, there would be a part where the injured party cries and the part fraught with paperwork. I have done the crying part and I hate myself for the simple fact that I fell in love with that bastard. I can't stop thinking about him. But there’s something else, too. The knowledge of being watched for years has left its mark. No one follows me anymore, yet I still catch myself checking for them.

I somehow managed to move back to my old house. Laszlo owned that property but gave it to me right away, ahead of the divorce, along with his vow he’d never set foot within a couple hundred yards of me.

All my furniture is still in this house, kept in pristine condition, with a new, state-of-the-art security system installed and a maintenance company—unconnected to Laszlo—available for repairs on demand, their monthly fee prepaid for a decade.

Perhaps I am crazy to have accepted these terms, but I need a familiar environment to deal with all this upheaval. This has come with challenges. I spend the evenings noticing things that never used to bother me before. The quirky café across the road has a perfect view of my front door. The

streetlight outside my bedroom went out two days ago and nobody's fixed it. I now can tell exactly how a person would sit in a parked car to see into my kitchen without being seen themselves, because I've read the reports. The knowledge of being watched for years used to feel like being loved. I told myself that, and I believed it. Now I know what the watching was for, and it feels like what it always was—a man studying prey he'd decided to take. He taught me that, in the end. He taught me to be afraid of the stillness.

Laszlo has taken over every waking moment, then my dreams when I sleep. Everything he did to me, every touch, is imprinted on my skin. It is scientifically impossible but it feels as though not even my DNA was spared. Whatever makes me Manon Valmont is no more. He’s scrambled my hormones, my very spirit, and turned me into something different. Something signed by him, in his blood.

The biggest shock came three days ago, when the lawyer called to say Laszlo had signed the divorce papers. I made her repeat it. I'd spent the last two weeks bracing myself for a fight, because I couldn't imagine him letting me walk out so easily. But he did. There wasn't a meeting or any conditions I had to meet. The paperwork is with the lawyers now, and it’s all done. This should feel like winning but what I am is miserable because I miss him so damn much.

In the past, he went through great lengths to keep up with my life. He stalked me, covered me in his shadow each and every day. I was never alone. He was a constant, even though I wasn’t aware.

Now he’s gone. Might as well be dead…

"You've cleaned that tray five times," Daphne says.

We're in the morgue, which is the only place where I feel like myself, the only place where Laszlo's blue eyes aren't giving me nightmares but haunting me with bittersweet memories I can’t let go of. Mrs. Kaminski lies on the table between us, a seventy-two-year-old woman who came down from the cardiac ward this morning.

"I'm being thorough, doing this so you don’t have to. I have some time to kill."

"You've gone quiet and that's not you. So either you're dying or something's happened, and you'd have told me if you were dying, because you'd be running your mouth about running your own tests." She snaps her gloves off and comes to stand next to me. "Talk to me."

I laugh, except it doesn't come out as a laugh. Somehow, I've resisted spilling the beans until now. I should have told her weeks ago, but I needed time to process.

"I'm divorcing my hot husband."

"Oh, love," she says, and her whole face changes. "What did he do? Apart from being dangerous and controlling, I mean…"

"You know he owns a several funeral homes," I say. "Well, and more properties, too. I won't go into detail but around two weeks ago I had a hunch to go to one and I was right. There was a room in it dedicated to me, Daphne. Full of files from the past seven years, all about my life before I married him. Photographs of me sleeping, creepy stuff. Notes on where I go and who I talk to, photos of me with other people." I have to stop and breathe because it obviously still upsets me to talk about it. "Here's the thing: he's been watching me since before we ever met. The marriage wasn't the start of it. It was just the first time I found out."

Daphne stares at me, her mouth agape. "And why didn't you tell me that before?"

As tears prick my eyes, she pulls me into a hug. "Shhh, baby, it's okay. I knew there was something suspicious about this man the minute I saw him. Motherfucker." The savage version of Daphne is rearing its head. "Him and his gorilla-built lap dog," she huffs. "Whatever he called it, that's not love. Men who love you don't do shit like that. Not the normal ones."

"I know." Except Laszlo is not normal, and neither am I. She doesn't know the half of it.

"Does he know you found it? I suppose he does since you asked for a divorce."

I nod. "I spoke my mind, told him everything I thought about it, and then I left. I haven't seen him since." I pick up some pencils on her desk and line

them up because I can't stand my hands being idle. "It's truly over between us. He signed the papers real fast."

She doesn't look shocked now, but I know I can't tell her any more than I have. Daphne is too innocent to know about my brother being recorded killing someone and what really happened to Charles. Not to protect Laszlo—that I won't do ever again. It's that Daphne still thinks my father operates a shipping company for a living, and that Rafe is some sort of security guy for Laszlo. She's the one person left in my life who was never part of my family's world, and if I tell her, she'll become a part of it. Can't do that to her.

So I let her believe only that Laszlo has stalked me religiously in the past seven years and he kept all the info about me in one room. I don't want to be the one deciding what she gets to know, but I just don't see another way. Some things I will simply take to the grave if I must.

"You've gone somewhere again," she says.

"I'm here."

"You're lying, but I'll allow it." She takes my hand—I've been folding and refolding the same square of gauze without noticing—and squeezes it still. "Help me get Mrs. Kaminski cleaned up. Her granddaughter's coming to see her at four."

We wash her, and I comb her hair back off her face while Daphne folds the sheet down square across her chest and settles her hands over it. Small things. Nothing that needs a doctor. But it's half an hour of just the two of us and a dead woman who had a nicer death than most, and it's calmed my nervous system enough for me to function.

I don't tell Daphne that I already know what I'm going to do next. She'd try to stop me and she'd be right to, but I don't want to be talked out of it.

I've made up my mind.

When I leave Daphne, it's past the end of my shift. I grab my things and head out. Today, I don't have my car.

Denis is waiting at the far end of the car park outside outpatients. It’s a place where everyone’s minding their business and their problems. Nobody’s going to pay him any mind. He's leaning against the car with his coat done up to his throat, and the moment he sees me he looks me over from head to foot, checking that I'm all right. He’s always been like a mother hen with me. Rémy's in the passenger seat with the window down. He salutes me with his hand, which from him is practically a hug.

"You look terrible," Denis says, discarding French for English. Oh, so it’s bad like that.

"I'm getting divorced. It's meant to be slimming."

He doesn't laugh, and for a moment he seems thrown. Oh shit, he didn't know. Of course not, dammit. I haven't told anyone in the family, especially my parents. That's exactly why I called Denis and not anyone else. He won't run to Papa. He’s more loyal to me.

"You said a lot on the phone," he says, "but nothing about what’s on your mind. So tell me straight. What are you planning, and how much trouble is it going to bring down on you?"

The two men are older than me but only by about a decade, or perhaps a bit more, and have been around since I was a teenager. Denis taught me how to ride a bike. Rémy sat outside the emergency room the night I broke my wrist falling off it. They were both there, quietly furious, the first time a boy made me cry. They know to appear when I need them and stay hidden when I don't. Basically, they're the two my father always trusted to keep an eye on me, especially when I tried going somewhere I shouldn't be. They never once ran to him when I broke the rules. Out of everyone tied to my family, they're the ones who are tried and tested when it comes to trust.

"You know what he did to get me," I say. "Before we were officially married. What he did to my brother, and to Charles. I’ve told you this on the phone."

Denis inhales sharply and starts cracking his knuckles. What an awful habit. Rémy stops looking out of the window.

"We heard things," Denis says carefully. "We didn't know for certain, until you mentioned it."

"Now you know. Laszlo arranged all of it and it wasn't a coincidence that Julien was there that night. He set it all up to get back at my father. Charles is dead because of a grudge between two old men, and I was his leverage." I keep my voice bland because I don't want to cry in front of them, and I'm sick of crying already.

I’m so grateful that they’re not making a big fuss about this, although I have no doubt they’re thinking up the most efficient ways for skinning Laszlo alive. "It’s not just him.” I want to make this clear so they don’t go blaming one side. Because yes, as much as I said I wouldn’t, I’m still protecting the bastard a little. “My father handed me over knowing exactly what he was doing when he agreed to this marriage. The narrative suited him and I don't want to know that I did it for the family. My family is the main reason this happened."

Rémy leans forward from the back seat. "You're sure about this?"

"I'm sure."

Denis doesn't say anything, but he’s not dismissing me either. "Tell me what you want?" he finally asks, and I smile.

There’s a place Laszlo loves more than he has ever loved anything that breathes, and I'm one of the only people alive who's been inside it. His private area in the mortuary, where he actually works. He took me down there to show me—it was as if he was letting me see the inside of his own soul. That's the thing I want to break. I don't care about the money or his properties. He has plenty of it and I can take care of myself like I’ve always done.

"It'll be empty," I say before Denis can ask. "I'll check it myself first. He won’t be there. I'm still a doctor, Denis. I'm not going to hurt anyone. I just want to take the one thing he loves and leave him with nothing, the way he left me."

For a moment, neither of them says anything. Then I catch Rémy shaking his head, sighing.

"He'll know it was you," Denis says.

"Good. I want him to know."

"He keeps men in that building, Manon."

"I will make sure that the whole place is empty. I don't want anyone to get hurt. I don’t want Dolores to get hurt. Anyway, she’s been getting a lot of days off recently. Laszlo wants to give her an easy retirement. He says he’ll be fine doing the cooking himself."

Denis knows he’s not going to win this argument. He has never once in my life been able to tell me no, and both of us know it. He breathes out slowly through his nose and rubs a hand over his jaw, glancing at Rémy, who gives a shrug.

"Get in the car," Denis says. "I'm not talking about this here."

* * *

There's one thing I have to do first, and I've been putting it off since this whole shitstorm started.

My father is at his desk when I come in, a glass of cognac at his elbow, reading glasses pushed up into his hair. He looks at me over the top of a document like I'm a meeting he forgot he'd scheduled.

"Manon. This is a surprise."

"I know about Maman and Kazik Novak."

His expression doesn't change at all. "That's a very old story," he says.

"I’m sure it won't take you long to tell me your version."

He sets the document down, folds his glasses and puts them on the desk, taking his damn time. Every second he lets pass, moving like a sloth, makes me want to scream.

"They were engaged," he says. "A long time ago. It ended. She married me afterward. I don't see what business it is of yours."

"It ended because you ended it. You paid a man to create fake photos of him cheating. They loved each other, and you destroyed it because of some petty shit you got going on with the Novaks." My voice is becoming shrill and I try to check myself. It’s the hardest thing. "You kept up this silly war between our families over a woman you didn't even love."

Something flashes across his face. I’m pretty positive it isn't shame—more like annoyance that I found out.

"Who told you this?"

"Is it true?"

He picks up his glass and stares at it like that’s going to make me disappear.

"I did what was best for the family," he says. "I needed a wife. She was an acceptable choice. Your grandfather agreed with me. Your mother has had a comfortable life."

"She's had a miserable one, and you know it." I'm shaking now and don't try to hide it. "This feud crap will never end with people like you running things. You married a woman who was in love with someone else and you called it a good match. Then you did the same thing to me."

"I didn't arrange your marriage, Manon. Novak did that."

"But you knew who he was. You knew what his family was to ours, and you let it happen. You smiled at my wedding and gave a speech because it suited you, and because your precious Julien is worth more in your eyes. Never mind that all he does is get into scrapes he needs to be pulled out of." Then comes the thought I’ve been mulling for a while: "You wanted me in that house, didn’t you? A Valmont among the Novaks. You thought I'd be useful to you in there eventually."

He doesn't deny it. He leans back in his chair and looks at me almost like he's proud, which is so much worse than if he'd shouted.

"You were always going to be useful eventually," he says. "That's what a daughter is, in the end. Something you spend when the price is right. I spent you on your brother's life. It was a fair trade."

There it is—the stab in the chest. No guilt or hesitation. He admits to my face he traded me for Julien and he'd do it again. After all, it was merely a business decision. I pace around the office because I cannot sit down. I won't touch his chairs, his furniture, him … and it hurts to simply inhale the oxygen in this room. This might have been my home one upon a time, but all it is now is the house where the man who made my birth possible lives. That is it, nothing more.

"I never wanted any of this." I wish I'd been born elsewhere. I wish this man were not connected to me. I wish I'd never known this life, or knew anyone in it. "I told you when I got ready for college. I didn't want the family, I didn't want the money, I didn't want a single part of what you do. I built a whole independent life so I'd never have to kowtow to your demands. But you reached into it and used me anyway, exactly like everyone else in this world that you touch."

"You're a Valmont," he says, as if that settles it.

"Charles is dead," I spit out. "A man I loved is dead. My brother nearly went to prison. I lost almost a year of my life, and much more. All of this comes back to you, to your selfish lies from way before I was born."

He shrugs. The son of a bitch.

"You survived," he points out. "That's what we do. We're one family."

I cannot believe this man. I came here wanting him to be sorry, because I genuinely thought that in some way, somehow, he cares about me. But I see now he isn't capable of it, and I think part of me always has always known that.

"I am nothing like you," I tell him, the truest thing I've ever said to him.

I leave him at his desk and make sure I don't slam the door, because doing so would convey that he got to me, and I've given him enough.

I find my mother in the small sitting room next to the stairs. She's got a book in her lap and she seems deep in thought when I walk in. She's the glue that held everything together with quiet grace, keeping four decades of suffering buried under the surface. Nothing that good linen, fine china and perfectly organized dinner parties won't fix. She loves to blend into the

background and seem invisible, because that’s what she was meant to be. She’s decoration in this house.

Yet, she’s loved me. She cared about me. She's the only one under this roof who ever did.

She looks up when I come in, and whatever's on my face makes her move the book from her lap to a side table.

"Manon, what’s wrong? What happened?"

"I'm getting divorced, *Maman*." Might as well get it out, without frills.

She doesn't say a word, just holds a hand out to me. I cross the room, let her catch my fingers in a soft grip as I sit down beside her.

"I thought I could do it," I say. "The year. I thought I'd walk out at the end of it and never look back. And instead I—" My throat closes. “I can’t.”

"You fell in love with him," she says gently. Not a question.

"How did you know?"

"Because I’ve watched the way you look at him when you think no one’s looking." Her thumb moves over the back of my hand. "I know what that look means, ma chérie." She smiles sadly. For a fleeting moment I think she's going to say something about her... “But he looks at you the same way. So why?”

"He hurt me," I respond. "Not the way you'd think. He didn't lay a hand on me. He just—" I press the heels of my hands to my eyes. "He decided things about my life. About who I'd love and when and how. He used me, *Maman*. And when I found out, there was nothing left to save. I … I can’t say more right now."

She doesn't defend him or try to lecture me about the meaning of marriage. Nor does she tell me how all men are like this, which I’m grateful for. She just holds my hand, and murmurs, "Then you're braver than I was."

I want to ask what she means, but I won’t open old wounds. She doesn’t deserve that.

"Stay tonight," she suggests. "In your old room. Let me look after you for one evening before you go back out there and pretend you're fine."

I almost say yes, but if I stay in this house another hour, I'll fall apart. With my father under the same roof, this is the last place on earth I can afford to come undone. The earth has just shifted under my feet, and there’s nowhere in this world I belong anymore. For some time, I was starting to believe my home was with Laszlo. I wasn’t even missing Charles, or feeling guilt at all the chaos my husband brought into my life.

He brought out all my darkness and put a crown on it. A crown made of blood and heat and tears. He didn’t mock or berate me for being this way. Before him, I had no idea who I was. I knew what I was on paper, a good surgeon, steady when everyone else fell apart. I knew how I saw the world. But the part of me even I couldn't see, he was the only one who found the key, and turned it, and let it out.

Now, Laszlo’s gone. My father’s gone, if I ever had him. Charles … well, Charles is in a better place.

And here I am, drifting.

"I have a shift," I lie.

She can tell it's a lie, but doesn’t push. That’s my mother—she goes with the flow. Perhaps that’s the way. It’s some sort of coping mechanism.

I kiss her cheek at the door, then she lifts her hand to caress my face.

"Whatever you decide," she says, "decide it for yourself. Not for your brother or your father. Not even for me. For once, *ma chérie*, choose the thing that's yours and only yours."

Her eyes gloss over, so I gather her in a tight embrace.

"Thank you, Maman," I say, and go without turning back because if I see her face again, I might stay. I just can’t do that.

* * *

By the time I park, it's dark. I'm far enough down the lane that Laszlo won't see me, and close enough to watch the gates.

Getting here was easier than it should have been. I’m realizing that since the divorce, Laszlo has cut down on security. The men who used to sit all around the property around the clock are gone. Denis checked the perimeter twice this evening and spotted two guards where there used to be many more, both of them near the road, not the house. Does he care for his own safety?

Dolores left an hour ago. I watched her drive off myself, in the little car she's had for years, and I won't let Denis move until I'm sure she’s gone. Everyone else is gone for the night, and Laszlo isn't home yet.

As I sit here, memories keep rushing back. His touch. His smell … how he could be rough and gentle at the same time. Brutal, yet caring. With me, he always was. He knew what buttons to push and when. He saw into my soul and reflected it back to me a thousand times over. He did not just see me, he read me.

He loved me in his way, an intense and all-encompassing emotion. Some would say it was worth the manipulation and the lies. The secrets that kept building and building higher than the tower of Babel would have paled in comparison to the benefits I might have reaped if I stayed. Like my mother did. Against the dictates of her heart, she stayed—perhaps because she had no idea of my father’s duplicitous nature. If she did find out, would she regret her decisions?

But Laszlo has always lifted me up, made me a queen of his world. In whatever twisted universe he pulled his feelings from, he gave me his all. Still, any of this didn't stop him from doing everything he did.

There was nothing he wouldn’t do to have me. Including murder.

What if I disappointed him one day? What if his feelings suddenly changed? Would he kill me, too? I wonder how much farther he’d go.

Headlights come up the lane.

It's his car. It slows at the gates, turns in, and rolls up the drive. I lift the phone and text Denis one word.

*Now.*

I wait through the horrible silence, and nothing happens. I think Denis has got it wrong, and something in me is almost relieved.

Then the house explodes.

The sound comes first, so big it isn't really a sound, more an experience that blows my insides into a million shards. I feel it in my chest and my teeth. The windows blow out all at once, and then the fire climbs up out of the building, roaring and massive, lighting up the whole lane in orange. His car stops dead. The door opens before it's even stopped moving.

He gets out.

Even from here, I witness exactly how he's reacting. He's got both hands on his head and he's turning, staring at the fire then his back to it, going in a circle. Then he does something I've never seen him do. He screams. My husband, who stays calm through everything, stands in his own driveway with his house burning in front of him and screams as though a vital organ is being torn out of him.

After he gets it all out of him, he turns toward the lane.

And he sees me.

I don't hide. I don't start the car. I sit there with the fire lighting up my face through the windscreen, allowing him a good look at me. His hands come down from his head. His whole body goes still, and we look at each other across the darkness and the light with everything we did to each other in between.

Somewhere behind him, faint and getting louder, the first sirens start.

As he stares at me, my soul dies.

I should celebrate, feel triumphant. After everything he put me through. I told myself he has other homes he can use. He won’t be destitute.

But this was his favorite. This is where he spent the most time, the one in which he chose to live. The home where we lived. Together.

The doubts seep in. Am I getting revenge because he did something to me, or because he made me look in the mirror to see a monster I never recognized?

Laszlo taught me about myself. But I didn't want to know this much. I could have lived in blissful ignorance. From now on, I won't be able to live at all because where do I go from here? Where does one go when they've discovered their true nature, and now there's no going back? For years I've enjoyed sitting on my high horse, knowing I'd never become as ruthless as my father or anyone in his world. The joke's on me!

My husband managed to destroy that delusion in nine months. I know now that I'm capable of as much horror as any of the Valmonts or the Novaks. Every. Single. One. Of. Them. Charles would be laughing at me from wherever he is right now.

Fuck me.

Fuck Laszlo Novak.

Why should I be sorry?

*You took everything from me, and I gladly allowed you to come in and take it.* What the hell did you expect?

Look at him now, just as lost as me. For the first time in the last few weeks he knows exactly where I am, and there is nothing at all he can do about it.

Starting the car, I pull away carefully, driving through the tears that blur my vision. But as the sobbing wracks me from head to toe, I don't once dare to look in the mirror at the man I love and hate with all of my being.

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# CHAPTER 33

Laszlo

The Hudson Valley house is no more. Whatever remained was leveled and cleared in weeks, because you can't leave ruins standing in a place like that. It would affect the value of nearby homes. Now it's a foundation line and a basic frame, waiting for the new build to come into existence. I drive out there sometimes to check on things, but I don't stop. It's been a year of investigators, permits, architects and blueprints, and I've taken it slow. I want the exact replica of that house to replace what once existed. Anything different won't do, and I don't care who disagrees. My Hudson Valley address will return to its former glory.

There was no pretending it was an accident. You don't level a house like that with a bad gas line, and the men who look at these things knew inside a day it was a charge, set to go when it was meant to. So the report says this was intentional, and it was fortunate nobody was in the house, because Manon made sure of that. Her heart got in the way of her revenge. What the report doesn't say is who, because that part I buried myself. Every thread runs into a wall. No suspect found. It'll be a cold day in hell before that changes.

Manon wanted to hurt me and she did, though not for the reason she thinks. Yes, that house was my sanctuary. It became one when she was in it. Without her, none of it means anything. I put men in the ground and don't lose a minute of sleep, but losing her took me apart in a way none of my

sins ever managed. If I told myself I don't miss the place, not the building but the version of my life that lived in it after she moved in, I'd be lying.

I can make an exact replica of that house real again, down to the last hinge, and it still won't have what was in the rooms. Her voice. Her joy, her frustration, her exhaustion, her temper. Her body next to mine at night.

It’s almost a year on since the fire and I can still smell her. I don't want her face to fade. I don't want to forget a single thing. There aren’t enough pictures of the two of us. Just the engagement and the wedding, and nothing much since.

I work out of the Basset house now, an hour and a quarter south. I rebuilt the mortuary here to match the one she torched, down to every detail as I couldn't stand it any other way.

Four in the morning is the best time to be down here. My phone's on silent and Tomek isn't ruining the quiet with the latest thing the government's putting in the water. Just me and whoever's turned up in a black bag needing my attention. The dead are good company. They never interrupt, and not one of them has ever pointed out that I'm not in control anymore. So this is fine. This is great. Then why is everything so gray?

The doors bang open behind me, and there goes the quiet.

Tomek strolls in like he's got nowhere to be. He doesn't go upstairs to raid my fridge, nor does he start some spiel. He parks himself near me and waits.

"That one's off the fire on Richmond Terrace, boss." He shifts his weight. "Nothing on her. No bag, no phone. They should have a name soon. Then we find her family."

"Or I sponsor the burial, as always."

"Yeah." A pause. "You want me to hang about? I can hang about."

"No. Go make coffee. And stay off my mug. I'll know."

"I never touch your mug."

"You touch my mug constantly, Tomek."

When the door shuts behind him, I unzip her.

Early thirties. Dark hair, soaked through from whatever they threw on the fire. The right side of her face is gone, burned cheek to ear before she got out, so I leave the face and look at the rest of her, and the rest of her is where my body quits on me.

She's tall. About Manon's height, the height I've followed down more streets than I'll ever admit to. Same hair. Same build. The fire took the part of her face I'd have recognized in a blink, so what's left could be my wife or a stranger—I can't tell which.

A cold weight sits on my chest and won't lift. It isn't her. It's not Manon. There's no version of the world where she stops existing and I keep going, so this fear is irrational. I know this, yet it doesn't help.

What kills me is that I can't check. She made me promise. If I ever loved her, she said, I wouldn't try. I called every man off her the day she walked out. This is the one thing I've given her instead of taken. So she's out there and I don't know where. Could be where she used to live, but I don’t check. That door is shut to me now.

She's fine. She's asleep somewhere I don't own, alive, nowhere near me.

I take the woman’s left hand first and press my thumb into the base of the fingers, feeling for the ridge a blade leaves after enough years. Nothing. Of course nothing, she's right-handed, the callus would be on the other one. So I turn the right hand over, the one that would tell me for certain, and the palm's burned down to nothing. There's nothing left to feel.

I reach for the other hand again, and my arm catches the tray. Everything goes off it and onto the floor. Scalpels, forceps, the lot.

I leave them there.

That's how I know I've lost it. Ask anyone who's watched me straighten a picture in a house that’s not even mine. My mother calls it a disorder. I call it standards. I have never once in my life left anything on the floor, and I leave it there now.

I use the voice command to make the call. Rafe answers fast for the hour.

"It's four o'clock," he says.

"Is it her?"

"Is what her?"

"Woman on my table. No name yet. She shouldn't have been where she was, so don't call me stupid for thinking it. I need to know where Manon is. Now. Tonight."

"I won't call you stupid."

"I'm not in the mood, Rafe. Tell me."

He's choosing his words. I can hear it.

"Laszlo." Careful. "You promised."

"I did."

"You made me swear I'd never put a man near her again." A beat. "I have no idea what she's doing right now. That's the whole point."

He's right. I made him swear to do nothing, to not go check on her, even if I threatened to walk off a ledge to make him break. He's told the story a couple of times since, how I came apart on my own men that night. Rafe doesn't tell stories, so it must have been a performance worth repeating.

I've told myself for a year that letting her go was love in action. Right now the opposite feels like love. I reach across the bed for her some nights, this woman who set fire to my body and my house and walked out with both still burning, and I allow her all the payback she needs. Because the fire was mine to earn. Fact.

You'd think a year would sort a grown man out.

I even tried the cure everyone swears by. Took a woman to dinner a few months back, mostly to stop Constantine's yapping. Clever, lovely, said the right things, no idea who I was, which was most of the appeal. I sat in a restaurant I'd have chosen for Manon and watched this poor woman's mouth move, all the while thinking about my wife telling me I'm not funny while she lost a fight with her own smile. I paid before the food came. Drove the

woman home, apologized, then sat on my couch until the sun came up. She was perfect, and that was the problem. She'd never once want to bury me in a gold-plated casket.

I gave Manon the divorce. Gave her the freedom and the money she wouldn't touch. Then I did the part that actually cost me, which wasn't the explosion she thinks broke me. I stopped following her life.

Is she still eating badly? Is she still alone? Not my circus. Keeping up with Manon Valmont was the one act I was ever truly great at, and now I sit in the empty ring.

"Laszlo." Rafe, still there. "I'm sick of this. You want me to check anyway. One call. You'll at least know who the girl is by morning."

I want to. God, I want to. One call and I'd breathe again.

I look at the woman on my table. "No," I say.

He makes a sound that's pure disgust.

"Stay on the ID. Tell me as soon as you have it." I get down on the floor and start putting my instruments back, one at a time, in order. "I'll do her right in the meantime."

"Hmmm." Closest thing to an agreement he owns.

I hang up and get to work.

The result comes a little after six. Rafe pulled strings.

It isn't her. Of course it isn't.

I wait to feel better and I don't. Relief isn't a thing I have much practice with.

Her name was Ana. Twenty-four. She came out of a fire in a lockup down by the water, one that used to be ours before Ferro took it, and she landed on my table because the unclaimed dead in this city all wash up on it sooner or later. The report calls the fire undetermined. It calls her a runaway. Five attempts on her own life. A missing person's report her mother filed eight months back that nobody ever chased.

None of my men set that fire. I check, because I need to know whose war it was, and the answer comes back nobody's.

Except she's Manon's height. Manon's hair, near enough. Manon's build. And the fire took enough of the rest of her that the things I'd know my ex-wife by, the scars, the marks, the map of her I could draw with my eyes shut, are gone. It stands to reason I needed confirmation. What's left could have been my wife or a stranger who was unlucky enough to be built like her. That's the horror of it. I know Manon’s body better than anyone alive, yet I couldn't rule out this was her.

Here’s the kicker: A girl who looks exactly like my estranged wife doesn't walk into an untraceable fire on the exact stretch of water my turf war has been waging on for a year. I know how coincidence stacks. I know how a message stacks too, and this one was meant for me.

Then I make myself stop, because the war is won. There's no one left standing who could send me a corpse wearing my wife's face. I spent a year making sure of that, so I try not to think about her. It's bad luck and somebody else's mess.

I finish her before I leave. Washing the soot off the side the fire didn't reach, I comb her hair out. It’s the same shade as Manon's. I do what can be done with the ruined side. Nobody's paying me for this. I just won't put a girl in the ground wearing the worst night of her life. It's the only kind of apology I excel at, the kind the other party can't hear.

I have not forgotten the ear on that tray in my and Manon’s bedroom. I tore this city down to the studs looking for the man who walked in wearing a Ferro coat, and I never found him. My memory is long. Whoever it was will answer, and I'll be the one to collect.

But that's a bill for another night.

Tonight there's a funeral I need to attend. I organised it myself.

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# CHAPTER 34

Laszlo

We hold the funeral at the Basset house, in the big viewing room at the front, the one with the good carpet and the doors that don't carry sound.

I arrange the flowers myself. I choose white, heavy on the lilies, the kind of flower you send when you don't like the person, but the whole room needs to know you spent money anyway. There's a book by the door for guests to sign. There's soft music playing in the background and at the front, in one of the most elaborate Novak caskets one can find, all waxed and shiny, lies the last Ferro to perish, his hands folded.

Matteo, an only son who inherited the family business after his father's untimely passing, seems so peaceful now in the open casket. Late thirties, so much life ahead of him. I took him myself, ten days ago, to a warehouse that belongs to me, took care of him there. Then I brought him here and made him look beautiful, because I'm not an animal. Also it was because I needed his people to see him first. It was going to be the first thing that greeted them at the door.

I sent the invitations to four key people and they're showing up on time. They're the ones holding Ferro's together.

Gennaro Sarno comes in first, middle-aged and silver-haired at the temples. He used to be Ferro's number two, a careful man who's outlived three bosses through sheer shrewdness. Then Bruno, who breaks arms for a living

and looks like it. Yet he's got a great logistical brain on him. Then Nunzio, twenty-six and very much like Tomek in his wide-eyed stance, only more creative and resourceful. Last but not least, Patrick, who keeps Ferro's money safe. All one needs to run a successful company.

They all come in expecting a wake. They came because a man doesn't skip his boss's funeral, not when the boss's funeral is being run by the man everyone knows put him in the box, because skipping it would say more than showing up. They came to stand in my house, drink my best Soplica vodka, and take my measure. They all think this is some kind of truce. Well, they are not wrong.

They see Matteo in the casket and the room gets suffocated with their heavy breaths, and even heavier aftershaves.

Gennaro stops so hard that Bruno walks into his back. Nunzio makes a startled sound. Patrick's eyes go to the door, then to me, then to the door again, doing the math on the distance and realizing he has nowhere to go.

The doors are already shut and Rafe's against them with his hands folded. Tomek's by the flowers with a pack of *paluszki* he thinks I can't see. Constantine's off to the side, examining his own knuckles like they're more interesting than any of us.

And laid out along the front, beside Matteo, are four more caskets. Open. Empty. Waiting.

"Sit down," I tell them. "You're late for your own funeral."

Nobody moves, but the fear is palpable.

On each of the four chairs at the front there's a card. It's a good one we print for real services, heavy stock with gold edges. Each one has a photograph, along with a name, a date of birth and date of death, which is today.

Gennaro picks his up first because I can appreciate he's got balls. I watch him find his own name on the front. His birthday. Tonight's date sits under it, printed weeks ago. And below that, the line we always fill in for the family.

Cause of death.

“Gunshot wound to the head,” he reads. His voice is pretty steady and I’m impressed.

“Front page is yours to keep,” I say. “The rest of the program’s mine.”

I don’t stand up front to start with my eulogy. I stand close, right among the four of them. I like this work because nobody ever interrupts a man at a funeral.

“You knew Matteo as your boss,” I tell the room. “So you must guess I’ll be brief. He was a boring man and there isn’t much to say. Instead I’ll tell you what he did, since none of you seem to have been paying attention while he did it.”

I walk to the casket and straighten Matteo’s cuff. It’s crept up, and the thing bothers me.

“A year ago you had a port. My port, technically, but I’m not petty. You had a man inside it and a man in the customs house. Every week you moved caskets through both that went right through. It was seamless. Great job.” I keep adjusting Matteo’s cuff until it’s just right. “The port’s been shut since spring. Your man inside drowned in April, which the coroner ruled an accident, and I signed off on personally because I did his makeup. Your man in the customs house took an early retirement to a country with no extradition, which is a nice way of saying he’s in a field somewhere. Marku’s packing house in Bushwick had an electrical fault in June. Sad. All those caskets, gone up at once.”

Nunzio’s breathing has gone heavy and loud. Bruno looks like a man ready to do a desperate thing. I need to watch out for him.

“You lost the routes in July, the showrooms in August. And then there was only Matteo, sitting on a business that couldn’t ship a hatbox, wondering why the phones stopped ringing.” I look at the casket. “So I came and got him. I wanted all of you to notice something important.”

I pick up the card from the second chair and read it as I walk.

“For years I didn’t do this part myself. I’d make the request, my man Rafe would take care of the rest, and I’d stay downstairs with the dead, where I’m comfortable.” I stop in front of Bruno and hold up his card so he’s looking at his own face. “I told myself that I made myself the new manager.” I laugh at my own little joke. “Bruno. Born the ninth of March. Cause of death, asphyxiation.”

Bruno moves.

He’s fast for a big man. Comes in low, under my arms, trying to put me down. I let him. I’ve spent a year handing this work to other men, and I want to feel it just once. Then I slide a forearm across his throat, pressing hard, and we go down into the flowers together. A stand tips over. Lilies everywhere. Water across the good carpet.

He’s fucking strong. He grabs my face and his thumb finds my eye. The pressure turns that whole side white. I don’t decide anything. I turn my head into his hand and bite down below his thumb, and I keep biting until the skin gives and tears away in my teeth.

He screams. His blood floods my mouth. It’s hot and tastes of copper, and there’s a scrap of him on my tongue. I spit it into the lilies and put my whole weight on the arm across his throat.

For twenty years I haven’t touched anyone’s blood without gloves on. Two pairs, if I don’t know where a body’s been. I know which diseases live in blood and how many weeks each one takes to show. Somewhere in the back of my head that list is running now, calm and in order. That’s what my head does.

The rest of me doesn’t care. I can’t get past that.

His hands claw at my arm, but soon his nails stop digging. His fingers go loose and paw at me, slower each time, then stop. I keep the pressure on until there’s no fight left under me. I’ve had my hands on thousands of dead men. Feeling one go is different.

When I get up, my shirt’s torn open at the second button and I’m breathing like I ran all the way here. The crisp white is red down the front. There are crushed lilies under him, and water and blood soaking into the good carpet.

A year ago I'd have been on my knees with a cloth before his heart stopped. Tonight I step over it.

My chin is wet. I wipe it with the back of my hand and it comes away dark. The hand is shaking, and it isn't fear. It's the first time I've felt anything since she left, and I want more of it.

Nobody moves to come to Bruno's aid, but they are all staring at me. I can't read much from their expressions. One done and three more to go. They know there's no way out.

"Asphyxiation," I say, and drop his card on his chest. "The card doesn't lie. I'd never let it."

That's when Nunzio runs. Optimistic of him.

He goes for the shut doors. Rafe steps aside and lets him get there, because there's nowhere to go. They're locked. Nunzio pulls the handles, then throws his shoulder into them. Nothing gives. He turns with his back to the door and his hands up.

I've got his card in my hand already. "Nunzio. Twenty-six. You were a child when your uncle brought you in, and you should've stayed being nobody. Instead you signed for three shipments last spring, which is how I know your name." I read the bottom line. "Multiple stab wounds."

"Mr. Novak." He's got both hands up, sliding down the door. "I just drove. I only ever drove, I swear on my mother, I never—"

"I believe you," I tell him, and I do. I take out the knife anyway, because the card's already printed, and a man who only drives still knew where the road went.

He has Tomek's eyes. Wide open, like a kid's. I notice it, and it changes nothing.

I grab his collar and drive the knife into his stomach. On my table the dead don't fight the blade. He does. Every muscle in his stomach clenches around it, and I have to lean my weight in to finish the stroke. He grabs my wrist with both hands, so I pull the knife out and put it in again, higher, up

under the ribs. The blade scrapes bone on the way in. I feel it through the handle, all the way up into my teeth.

He's yelling for me to stop. His breath is hot and fast on my face. His hands slip off my wrist. I stab him a third and a fourth time, fast. The bastard isn't going down and I need him on the floor. When his legs finally give out, I let go of his collar. He leaves a long red smear down the door.

My sleeve is soaked to the elbow. It's warm at the wrist and already cooling higher up, sticking to my arm. I know how long it takes to go tacky, and then brown. I've cleaned it off other people more times than I could count.

I straighten myself up. Blood is roaring in my ears. Ten minutes ago I couldn't leave a dead man's cuff out of place. Now I'm wearing two men's blood, and the only thing I want is the next card.

Rafe and Tomek lift Bruno and Nunzio into their caskets. Tomek has put his *paluszki* away. Two remaining and only one still standing—Gennaro has, at some point in the last minute, sat down in his chair with his card in his lap and his eyes closed. He's waiting for his moment like a professional and I like it.

I do him the courtesy of speed. Rafe holds his gun out to me without being asked. Gennaro opens his eyes and stares at me, ready. I respect that he isn't gripped by the kind of fear that makes people do crazy things in situations like this. The card says a gunshot wound to the head.

The sound of it goes through the sealed room, then bounces off the walls until it dies. Rafe and Constantine lift Gennaro and transfer him to his resting place.

Then it's Patrick at last.

He's on his knees by the last empty casket. He's talking before I can even get to him, fast, the words falling over each other, offering me things. Accounts. Passwords. His wife … as if I'd want her. He's sobbing like a baby.

"Patrick." I crouch to his level, which puts my ruined shirt and bloodied hands right in front of him. He groans. "I want one thing, and it isn't money."

“Anything.”

“A year ago a man walked into my house in one of your coats. Past my security, up my stairs, into my bedroom. He left an ear on my wife’s ring dish, where she’d find it getting dressed.” I keep my voice level. Scared men lie when you shout at them, and I want the truth off this one. “That ear belonged to Greg. He did my late runs to the crematorium for six years. The rest of him came back to me through my florist on Ninth, in a box.”

Patrick’s face goes slack for half a second. Then he pulls it back together, and I watch him decide to lie to me.

“I don’t know anything about it,” he says. “Mr. Novak, I swear to Christ. That wasn’t us. We’d never have gone near your house. We wouldn’t dare. Ferro heard about the ear the same as everybody else. He was scared of whoever did it, we all were. We thought it was you testing us—”

“It wasn’t Ferro,” I agree. “Matteo didn’t have it in him. It was you.”

He stops crying.

“I’ve had your books since the showrooms went in August. You keep very tidy books, Patrick. I appreciate that in a man.” I let him see I mean it. “Greg drank, and when he drank, he played cards at one of your tables. He owed you a little over eleven thousand dollars. It’s in your ledger, in your handwriting, marked paid in full on the Tuesday he stopped answering his phone. Greg never paid anything in full in his life.”

He opens his mouth to deny it, then closes it again.

“He called me,” he says at last. “Not Matteo but me because I handle the cash. He said Ferro wouldn’t survive a war with you, and I should get out while there was a chance. Our business is … you could say in transition. I thought I’d handle it. Figured I could make the boss happy by getting access to your house. I knew Greg had it. I knew he couldn’t pay back what he owed. I told him I’d wipe the debt if he brought me the key.”

That’s one of the dumbest things I’ve ever heard. Talk about underestimating me. This man had a death wish and today he’ll get his way.

“And Greg told you no.” I know my men.

He nods, and can’t look at me. “He said you’d bury him for it, that he’s worked for you too long and wouldn’t do such a thing. He said he’d rather owe me. He got up to leave. Of course I couldn’t let him walk out like that.” He swallows. “It was a spur of the moment thing. Bought him drinks until he passed out. I took the key off his ring and called a number belonging to whoever’s got Ferro’s by the balls. I don’t know who that is! The man who came to collect took the key and took care of Greg and that is all I know. I never saw him again. I never got a name. I swear on my children, I never knew who was paying.”

I believe that part. He has nothing left to bargain with, and he knows it. I also knew Matteo Ferro had no inkling of the break-in pretty early on. Which means the man responsible is still out there, and this room full of dead men isn’t the end of it after all.

I pick up his card. The last one.

His photograph. His birthday. Tonight’s date.

And where the cause of death goes, a blank line.

His eyes catch on the empty line. Every other card had a cause printed on it, and his has nothing. He thinks a blank means I haven’t decided, that I can still be persuaded to let him go. He gets off the floor and faces me.

“Why’s mine empty?” he asks.

“Because nobody printed a card for Greg.” I turn the card so he can see the empty line. “When he came back to me, There was one line in his paperwork that wasn’t filled in. You were there. So tell me how Greg died, and that’s what goes on yours.”

His mouth works, and no sound comes out. Then his legs go, and he sits down hard on the carpet.

“He bled,” he whispers. “The man cut him while he was out for the count and he bled. It was quick. I swear to you it was quick.”

“I did his body, Patrick.” I crouch down to him. “It’s never easy or quick when it’s one of your own.”

I open my kit on the carpet and lift out the trocar, the long steel tube I use to drain a body before a viewing. Sharp at one end, a hose fitting at the other. I turn it so the point catches the light. “This is the last thing I used on Greg. It goes in the belly and draws out everything that would make a viewing unpleasant. You’re early for it. My usual clients don’t feel the angle.”

He screams before it touches him. Gives me his kids’ names now, tells me they’re too young to be without a father. As if he cares. This man has spent half his fortune on whores and mistresses.

I push him flat. I set two fingers just above his navel, find the give in the muscle I’ve found on ten thousand people who felt nothing, and push the point through.

He comes up off the carpet. I drop a knee onto his chest and hold the tube where it is. The first inches are the loud part. Then I draw it halfway back and send it in again on a new line, up under the ribs. As he brings the ceiling down with his fucking screaming, I work it slow. One angle, then another. No hurry, because that would cause tearing, in turn leaving a mess I’ll be scrubbing out of this carpet till dawn.

Somewhere in it the words stop. His hands come up and take hold of my forearm. Not pulling anymore, just holding on.

Widows hold my arm like this at viewings, the first time they see the casket. I’ve stood still for it a thousand times and waited for them to be ready to let go. I don’t shake him off. I keep my knee where it is and wait, and somewhere in the waiting, whatever Bruno lit in me drains out and leaves nothing behind.

It goes on for a long time. Longer than the other three stacked together. I keep my knee on his chest and my thumb on the tap as I wait him out.

At the end he lets go all at once and goes soft under me. He told me how Greg died, and I gave him the same. When I stand, there’s more of him on me than on the carpet. I can still taste Bruno.

Matteo Ferro lies in his luxury casket, now surrounded by four men who came to bury their boss. I fill in Patrick's card last, by hand. Exsanguination. Same as Greg.

A year ago I could have made a phone call and stayed downstairs with my quiet dead while other men did this. I stopped being able to hand it off around the time she left, or maybe before that, on a garage floor with Charles Bellamy, the first man in years I killed with my own hands. Something opened up in me that night and never closed. There's no distance left between me and any of it now.

Not one of my men or my brother says a word, because they know tonight was different from other times.

I take a minute. Let my breathing settle. Straighten the front of my shirt, filthy as it is, out of habit. When I trust my voice, I turn to the room and bring my hands together. I planned every second of tonight. I won't leave the last one to chance.

"Thank you all for coming," I say. "That concludes the service."

***

We're most of the way through cleaning up and the sun is rising when Rafe stops beside me with his coat already on. Tomek has replaced the carpet—we were prepared for this and he is pretty handy. A priceless skill in this day and age.

"There's a thing you'll want to know," he says.

"Out with it. I've had a rough night."

"Somebody cleared the last of Ferro's debts nine days ago, the day after we snatched the head off." He watches my face. "Bought the vans, the leases, all three showrooms. Through a company registered in Panama. Clean money that someone moved fast." A beat. "Quietly. The way we'd do it."

I stop wiping my hands.

Ferro’s is finished. Nothing left to move, no route to move it on, and the main actors who ran it are dead in this room. The name’s worth nothing now. Whoever paid off those debts bought an empty company, a few hearses, and four jobs that opened up tonight.

“Scavengers,” Rafe offers, because he can see I’ve gone somewhere. “There’s always someone to buy a dead man’s shoes.”

Maybe. Except somebody had the money sitting ready inside a day, and knew exactly what they were buying before the ash went cold. I’ve spent my whole life being the man with the money ready who knows exactly what he’s buying. So I know the look of it when it’s somebody else.

And Patrick, who had no reason left to lie, went to his grave swearing he never knew who paid him for Greg. Somebody outside Ferro had money ready a year ago too. I don’t think that’s two different people.

“Find out who,” I say. “Be careful. Don’t spook it. This isn’t worth losing men over yet.”

“And the room?”

“Matteo gets a proper burial.” I look at the other four. “The rest go through the usual doors. No names, no stones. The way they’d have done me.”

Rafe nods and goes to make the calls.

I stay a while longer, alone in a room full of caskets and the men I put in them. I finished a war tonight with my own two hands, and blame or no blame, there is not one thing I wouldn’t have done to the men who came after what’s mine. Whatever ethical line other men have, I don’t have it.

And the woman who taught me that about myself, the one who lit the match that started all of this, is probably asleep right now, or at work, oblivious to everything.

Her choice.

I could go find her before the blood dries on me. I could track her down… but the promises I made to her matter.

As weariness sets in to embrace the emptiness, I am fully aware I’d do it all again tomorrow. For her. Whether she’s with me or not.

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# CHAPTER 35

Manon

John's a good man. That's the whole problem with tonight, if I'm honest, there is nothing actually wrong with him. He booked a restaurant you have to call weeks ahead to get into, he pulled out my chair, asked how my day had been and then he actually listened to the answer. He's easy on the eyes, and on top of that he laughs at his own jokes in a way I'd probably find charming if I were a different woman. Or the same woman way over a year and a half ago.

I lost a patient this afternoon so it’s one of those days. A man not much older than my father. I scrubbed out, got changed, and came straight to the restaurant, because Daphne spent months pushing me to go on a date and tonight I finally let one happen, just to prove I could. I'm proving the opposite.

So here I am, on the worst night I've had in months, sitting across from someone kind yet completely wrong. The only thing I can think about is that when I used to come home like this, wrung out and silent, Laszlo would crouch down and take my shoes off without asking me a single thing. He always knew when I didn't have the words in me. He'd pour me a drink, carry me to the shower, and then he'd leave me alone until I was ready to talk. He never once made me explain myself first or went out of his way to cheer me up.

My date is telling me a story about his sister's wedding. It's a perfectly nice story. I'm nodding in all the right places but it’s all instinctual as I stopped listening a while ago. Somewhere between the wine he chose and the dessert he wants me to try, I finally understand that I've been lying to myself for a year.

Today I dragged all my feelings for Laszlo right into dinner with a good man to tell myself they were dead. Instead, they just sat there in my chest the entire night, patient, waiting for me to stop pretending.

I put my napkin on the table. I tell him I'm sorry, that I had a very bad day today and never should have come.

"It's not you, John," I say. I think he gets what I mean. He's gracious about it, which somehow makes me feel worse than if he'd been angry.

Then I'm out on the street in the cold, holding my coat closed, and get in the car. I don't drive home. I can't be on my own tonight, yet I can't sit across from one more person who isn't him, so I drive to my mother's. My mother’s different. I don't even care that my father might be there. I'll avoid him.

It's been a year. A long, miserable, exhausting year without the man I still love. No matter what I do, this is the constant in my life. I would have thought Laszlo Novak wouldn't be capable of keeping his promise to me. But he has, and every day I wish he hadn't. I'm going crazy with this grief that won't go away. After all this time, he might have moved on. Maybe he finally let me go.

I never thought that being free of him would feel like the earth crumbled beneath my feet. Maybe at first, yes, but not now. I pushed him not to contact me and got exactly what I asked for.

The more time passes, the worse it gets. I’ve had panic attacks, to the point that they interfered with my work. I’ve taken more sick days this year than ever before. I stopped sleeping properly. I lie awake and keep reliving what happened. I stopped eating like a normal person. These days I have coffee for breakfast, instant soup for dinner, and a slice of toast over the sink when my body finally complains loud enough.

The thing I can't say to anyone, including Daphne, is that I miss him like crazy. I don't miss the surveillance or the control, but God, his presence… The way he'd take care of me when I came home too tired to speak. The way he'd pick some silly fight over nothing just to watch me come back to life. I was in love with a man who had watched me like something he'd hunted all his life, and he'd finally set me loose. Half the nights this past year I've wanted to call him and scream at him to come and take it all back. Take *me* back.

So I did the only thing I could to stop myself from going over the edge: I ran. I took every day of leave I was owed and went on a three-week trip to Italy and France. I went to places I've wanted to visit my whole life and felt nothing. As I stood in front of the Foro Romano and the Mona Lisa, I kept waiting for something to click, to change. But I kept turning to say something to him, and he wasn't there. So I cried and cried and cried. I came home in an even worse state than when I left.

I am way past wanting normal. Why would I? Laszlo ruined me for anyone else. He ruined me each day, more and more, until I finally became his.

I craved to be utterly destroyed by him. My body recognized what was happening. With him, it's always been easy to fall all the way to hell. I'd have died happy while being consumed by him.

Till death do us part. It isn't a simple vow. Not even divorce can override it.

Not even death, I am beginning to think.

Some would call that unhealthy. Maybe it was, from the outside looking in. But I know better now. With Laszlo, I've known a love few people experience in a lifetime, and I threw it all away because I couldn't handle the darkness.

I make it a point to speak to my mother regularly, even if it's just a phone call. The conversation is always safe, skirting around difficult topics, but it's like chicken soup on a cold day. Whatever we have between us, I'll take that bit of comfort. Tonight I need more than a phone call. I just need to talk to someone before my head explodes.

When I get to the house, my mother opens the door herself. She must have seen me pull up in my car. She steps back to let me in, then gives me a tight hug. She doesn't release me for a long while.

"Papa?" I ask when she pulls back and smiles at me.

"In the city until Thursday." She leads us into the kitchen. "Sit down. I'll make tea."

For a while, we both sit in silence, until I am ready to break it.

"I lost a patient today," I say. "It happens, and I know it's part of my job, but I'm not sure why, I couldn't sit this one out alone."

"You drove here because you haven't been taking care of yourself, my sweet baby." She reaches out and hooks a loose strand of hair around my ear. "You're exhausted. I can see it. All skin and bones." I don't deny that because it's true. My sleep schedule is totally off, but what's new? It's the nature of my job. Then again, it's not only that, is it? "Daphne phoned me before your trip, you know. She was worried about you. I didn't call because I told myself you'd come when you were ready. I thought maybe going off somewhere would do you good." Her tone is quite despondent, and I hope I can get through this conversation without breaking down. "I should have reached out sooner, Manon, and I'm sorry I didn't."

I shift uncomfortably in the chair. My mother loves me, I know. But she's always lived in my father's shadow, a passive attitude that bleeds into every aspect of her existence. This is how it's always been between us. If I were honest, I'd say we were never close where it mattered, although she's never been purposely cruel. I think her loveless marriage has weighed her down and in the end, how much of an emotional beating can one get before caving under the pressure? If "affectionately distant" were a term to describe a person, that would fit her to a T.

"I owe you an explanation, Manon," she says. "I've owed it to you for a long time, and I was too much of a coward to just call you and explain it over the phone, but you need to hear it now." She turns her cup a slow quarter-circle on the saucer. "At your wedding, I knew what family you were marrying into, and I should have said something, should have

intervened. I'm sorry I didn't stop it. Your father has a certain influence over me, and I was too afraid to cause a scandal."

"*Maman*—"

“There’s something you don’t know. About Kazik, your father-in-law, and me.”

“You’re wrong,” I say softly. “I do know.”

Her eyes widen and I shake my head. “You remember when I told you Laszlo lied to me and I couldn’t stay with him? I found out he knew about it. There was a picture of you and Kazik, when you were in your twenties. I put two and two together, and Laszlo told me. He also told me…” I swallow, hesitating.

“Told you what?” I hear the mortification in her voice so I squeeze her hands.

“I confronted him about the picture. Made him tell me everything. Apparently, my father had a hand in splitting you up. Kazik never cheated on you.”

She nods as a tear forms at the corner of her eye and trails down her cheek. “I guessed that, but by then it was too late. She keeps her eyes on the cup. "I was twenty-two, and I believed my grandfather, the man who raised me, over the man who loved me. I was raised to be that way, never questioning any man's word. Except Kazik. I thought he had betrayed me at first, but then I kept thinking about things. Meanwhile, I was married to someone else. Everything was so fast, and I could see it was intentional, so I wouldn’t change my mind. What else could I do?"

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"I didn't realize what was happening until your father told me you were getting married," she says, giving me a small smile. "I saw him for the first time in almost four decades at your wedding. I spoke to him for a few short moments, as long as I was able. I didn't dare look at him for the rest of the day, but I felt like I was young and in love with him all over again. That is when I understood I'd thrown my whole life away for being sensible, for obeying the men in my family. I never gave Kazik a chance to explain

himself. Fact is, even if he’d done all they accused him of, I probably would have taken him back. I know the truth now…"

I look at the tea and still don't touch it, not saying a word. I have so many questions, but I don’t want to ruin the moment. My mother reaches across and puts her hand over mine. Her hands are freezing.

"Manon, you love this man. You don't need to say a word; I can tell. You've been torturing yourself for a year, and I'm begging you, don't do it for another thirty years. I'm not blind. If you love him, go to him. You don't need to prove anything to anyone. Being strong is not the same as being happy. I have been extremely strong all my life, and I was miserable."

"It's not the same." My voice comes out rougher than I want. "You didn't know what your man really was, Maman. I do. I know exactly what he is."

"You should choose him for yourself, which is more than I ever got." She says it matter-of-factly. "I'm not saying he's the perfect man for you because I don't know him, but from what I've seen, he adores the ground you walk on. I'm telling you that you've been dead for a year, and I know it when I see it because I've been dead for almost forty. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Least of all you."

After that, we talk about other things, trying to rebuild a connection we lost years ago. I stay for another hour, and my mother tells me about the garden, a cousin's divorce, and a restaurant that closed in our neighborhood. At the door she holds on to me longer than she used to. "Think about what I said."

"I will."

I mean it, yet I still don't know what I'm going to do.

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# CHAPTER 36

Manon

Février is leaning on his cane beside my car when I shut the door on my way out, and I nearly walk into him before I see him in the shadows.

"For God's sake." My heart lurches. "You'll freeze to death out here."

"I was waiting for you," he says, as if there were nothing at all unusual about a man his age standing alone in a freezing driveway after dark. "I called. Your mother said you'd come. I'd sooner catch you out here than sit inside making conversation. What I've got to say isn't for other people to hear."

I frown. "About what?"

"I still hear things. At my age it's about the only use I've got left." He watches my face while he speaks, as if gauging me. "Three nights ago a young woman was brought into one of the Novak funeral homes. There'd been a fire. She had nothing on her to identify her." A pause. "She was your height, Manon. Could have been you. The fire took her face and most of the rest of her, so there was nothing left to say for certain it wasn't you."

The chill that goes through me has nothing to do with the cold.

"For most of that night," he says, "Laszlo stood over that girl believing she was you. Believing you were dead."

"He—"

"He didn't try to contact you because he swore to you he'd never do that, and it seems he keeps his word even when it's tearing him apart." His mouth twists. "A year ago your whole street would have been crawling with his men before that girl's body was cold. This time he stood alone and grieved for you, rather than break one promise to the woman who burned his house down." He shrugs, a small, delicate movement. "I thought you ought to know. Do what you like with it. I'm too old to pretend I don't care which way you go, but the choice is still yours."

I picture Laszlo staring at that woman's body, certain it was me, and never once reaching for the phone.

I can't live without that man. The moment I thought I'd finally gotten my freedom back, I couldn't get a full breath. He’s my oxygen. I just needed my mother’s words, and then the words of an old man standing in my parents' driveway to drive it all home.

"Thank you, Février."

"Don't thank me." He tips his cane toward my car. "He's at the Basset house tonight. Not that I'd know anything about it."

The Basset house is sitting in the dark when I pull up. One light burns at the back, but there's no one minding the entrance. His car is in the driveway, so he must be home.

I try the front door, and it's unlocked. Does he not care about his safety? How many people would love to kill the great Laszlo Novak?

I take a deep breath and go in. I'm not surprised to find him downstairs, in the mortuary where he normally works. It's such a familiar setting, even though he can't sense that I'm here. A year ago, he would have. His sleeves are rolled up and he has his back to me. He's wiping down a steel table that's already clean, nudging a tray of instruments an inch to the left and then back again. I stand in the doorway and watch him for a long moment.

For years this man knew where I was every minute of the day, and now I'm ten feet behind him in his own home and he has no idea.

"You've cleaned that table three times," I say.

He stops moving. My heart skips a beat, then races triple-time.

Then he turns around, slowly, as if he's not sure whether I'm real. Laszlo pales. He looks suddenly frightened, maybe because he realizes I'm real and he’s not hallucinating.

He crosses the room slowly. His hand comes up and stops in the air between us, close enough that I can feel his rapid breath, but he doesn't touch me. There's soot in the creases of his knuckles. Under it the skin's split on two of them, scabbed and days old, and the side of his hand is bruised yellow-green. That didn't come from wiping down a table, but I don’t comment on it.

I scramble to gather my thoughts, and for some reason I can't look at him just yet. I just don’t know what to say.

"Manon." He sounds so … defeated. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm not hurt."

"Then what happened?" His eyes move over, quickly assessing, and then he drags them back to my face. "You lost a patient and you're exhausted. You came here instead of home or somewhere else…" He makes himself stop. "Tell me what you need. Whatever it is, it's done."

"I need you to not say anything for a minute." My voice isn't steady, and I don't want to break now, after I've driven all the way here. "Because I don't want to change my mind."

He closes his mouth. I feel so uneasy, but I have to get this out. It's been long months of numbness.

"I want us to be together again. I want to come back."

He doesn't react. In truth, he looks like he’s not even inhaling oxygen. Then he says, very carefully, "You've had the worst kind of night. You're not—"

"Don't," I interrupt. "Don't you dare talk me out of it. I've spent a year proving I was strong enough to leave you, and the only thing I've proved is that I can go a whole year without sleeping."

He takes a step back instead of toward me, and his hands close at his sides, like he has to physically stop himself from reaching for me.

"I wish I could just pick you up and drive you home before you've finished the thought. I've wished for exactly that every day for a year, and no one can stop me when I want something." His voice goes down to a murmur. "But I can't repeat the past. I can't just own you again. You don't get taken, not by me, not ever again. I've done enough taking for both of us to last a lifetime."

He stands there with his hands at his sides, a foot of cold air between us, a man at his own graveside.

And there it is, the thing I drove across the city for and couldn't have named until he handed it to me. He always held back before, made me come to him, but that was a game he was winning. This is different. He's standing a foot away wanting me exactly as much as he ever has, keeping his hands at his sides, and this time there's no ulterior motive, nothing he gets out of it, no version where holding still works in his favor. He'd rather lose me than take me. That's the thing he never gave me before.

Laszlo won't say it, so I say do.

"I know what you are. You bury people. You've killed people. You stalked me, know everything about me down to my coffee order." I shake my head. "And you didn't just watch. You wanted a way in, so you made one. You set my brother up. You arranged the whole thing at the club, made sure he crossed a line and the only way to save him was to marry you."

He doesn't look away.

"I haven't forgotten any of it. I'm not going to stand here and tell you it was okay. It wasn't. It never will be."

My eyes are burning.

"But I tried living without you. I went to work. I saw my friends, made new ones. I let a good man take me to dinner. And I wasn't there for any of it. I sat across from him and thought about you."

My voice is about to give up on me.

"I spoke to my mother tonight, and she told me she'd made a terrible mistake. She warned me not to follow her example because being sensible cost her everything. I don't want to wake up in forty years and realize I should have chosen differently." I pause to gather myself. "I'd rather have you and everything that's wrong with you than a nice quiet life without you in it. I know what you are. I'm choosing you anyway."

He starts to move and I lift a hand because I'm not finished, and if I don't get the rest out now I never will.

"I told you I loved you the night I left. I said it to wreck you, and I meant it, then I told you it was dead, and I meant that too." I don't care anymore what I sound like. "It wasn't dead. I was lying to myself. To you."

He stands there, still as a statue..

"So I'm saying it again, and this time not to hurt you. I love you. Knowing all of it. Not the man I thought you were, but the one you actually are. I burned your house down and I'd do it again, yet here I am, saying it to your face." I'm out of breath now. "Do something with that."

He closes the space between us, and this time I let him—my choice. He takes my face in both hands. Gently. He's holding me like he's afraid of hurting me, or afraid I'll disappear if he grips too hard. He doesn't kiss me. He just holds my face and looks at me, close, for a long time.

"You're here," he finally says.

It’s as if he needs to hear it out loud to believe it.

"You're here," he says again.

"I am."

"I never changed the locks," he says. "I told myself I kept forgetting to." His thumb moves slowly along my cheek. "I didn't forget. I left every door I own open all this time, in case you walked back through one of them. The house we shared is gone, but no home is home without you. Bricks and walls mean nothing without you…"

His forehead comes down against mine.

"So finish this. Take me apart and don’t stop while there’s a single piece of me that doesn’t belong to you. Ruin me until I'm yours. I'm asking you."

He made me his for a year and never once had to ask. Now he's the one asking, this man who never, ever asks. "Ruin me until I'm yours" was never only about what he did to me. It's what he's begging me to do to him now.

My whole body lets go. I didn't know I'd been holding on that hard.

A year of lying awake asking myself if he ever loved me, if I'd thrown away the only real thing I had. Standing here, it stops. His arms don't loosen. The most dangerous man in the city has a hold of me, and I've never felt safer.

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# CHAPTER 37

Laszlo

There's a mouth on my cock.

That's the only fact I've established since waking, but it's a strong one, so I keep my eyes shut and don't move. The mouth is warm and the movement slow. Whoever this is has decided we're in no rush this morning, and for once I'm inclined to agree with the plan.

My hand finds the back of her head. I know this hair. I could pick it out of a line-up blindfolded.

My Manon is in my bed, her mouth stuffed with my cock. I keep my eyes shut a little longer. I'm a greedy man.

She hums as if she's felt me wake and finds it funny. The sound travels up my spine and takes my restraint with it.

"I knew I could wake you up like this," Manon says, and takes me deeper all the way to the back of her throat.

I open my eyes and lift the sheet. She's got me with her gaze holding mine. My breathing is heavy and I tell myself not to move, because I'm ready to fucking come in her mouth with my dignity fully intact.

"You've surgery at nine," I manage.

She answers by sliding her mouth all the way down, and the rest of the thought dies in me. She's not in any hurry. She takes her time, working me with her mouth and her hand both, her tongue dragging up the underside every time she pulls off. She keeps her eyes on mine the whole while, daring me to look away. I can't. I don't want to. So I fist her hair, just to have something to hold on to. She moans, and my control slips.

"Manon." I’m hoarse. "I'm close."

She takes me deeper instead, hollows her cheeks, drags one nail up the inside of my thigh, and the last shred of my composure evaporates. I come hard, down her throat, hips coming off the bed, her palm flat on my stomach holding me through it. She takes all of it. Every pulse and every drop while I grunt with pleasure. She swallows, her throat working around me until there's nothing left, and only then lets go of my shaft.

She sits back on her heels. Drags her thumb across her lower lip, catches what she missed, and licks it clean, watching me the entire time.

I stare at the ceiling until I can breathe again. This fucking woman ruined me this morning. Normally I'm the one that is awake first, five am sharp unless I’m working through the night. Then I watch her sleep. What the fuck happened to my routine?

"You didn’t set the alarm."

"I forgot. I woke up anyway and said your name, twice, but you looked cute sleeping." She reaches past me for the water.

"I don't remember that."

"You grunted and put your face in the pillow."

"I was relaxed and that happens rarely, but it's your fault so you should be proud of yourself." I get an arm round her and haul her down onto my chest before she starts getting on with her day, because I know how this goes—showered, gone, and elbow-deep in someone's chest across town by midday. She lands with a noise of complaint and lets me keep her there, which I don't take for granted. A year ago I'd have settled for the sound of her car driving off. I'm aware of the upgrade.

She smells like my soap. I put my mouth in her hair and decline to examine what that does to the lower part of my body, especially my cock, before the first expresso. I just came in her mouth, but that doesn’t matter.

"Stay," I tell her and it's not a question. Questions have never been my strength.

"I have a nine-hour list and a resident who has a history of fainting." She nuzzles her face in my neck. "One of us is useful to the living."

"I'm useful constantly. No complaints, no follow-up, never a phone call at two in the morning."

"You've found the one clientele that can't leave you." She chuckles at that. "It suits you."

That's closer to the bone than she knows, or exactly as close as she intends. "Low."

"Accurate, though."

I slide the strap of the thing she sleeps in off her shoulder, over the mark I gave her last night, and press my mouth to it. She tips her head to give me more of her throat. I take it slowly, savoring her, then I stop and just hold her, because there was a whole year I thought I'd never get to do this again.

“I see, Mrs. Novak.”

"Not currently married, incidentally." She props up on an elbow, her hair is a total catastrophe this morning, a crease from the pillow down one cheek. "There are signed pages, Laszlo. Several of them."

"Paperwork." I catch her hand and put my mouth to the inside of her wrist, where I can feel her pulse. "Signed pages I can live with. A divorce I can't un-sign, more's the pity. But I can marry you again by lunch, if you'll have me."

"You say that as though it's meant to reassure me."

"You accepted my last proposal at gunpoint. My standards have improved."

"Then you'll ask properly this time." She doesn't take her hand back. "Flowers. A speech. On your knees would be a nice touch—though the last time you had me over a sink in my parents' bathroom. You left me halfway there and strolled back out for dessert. So you'll forgive me if I want it in writing."

"That was tactics."

"That was very poor manners." She smooths my collar, perfectly serene. "My mother would have been appalled. I was appalled. I was also, regrettably, extremely turned on, which is the only reason you will be allowed to go on a honeymoon with me instead of serving you a restraining order."

"With you, they're the same thing." I turn her hand over and kiss the palm. "You know I tried to sell our plots when you left. Your name is already on the stone, so that made it difficult. Told Constantine to get rid of them." A beat. "He came back and said someone had already bought the pair." I kiss her palm again. "Turned out to be me. Some people are just obsessive. So don't lecture me about signed pages."

Her mouth fights a smile and gives up a little groan.

"You lie…"

“I made you smile though. Wouldn’t give them up at any price.”

“Is this insanity your idea of romance?"

"It's working, though." She laughs then, in earnest. Getting off the bed, she goes in the shower and gets ready in record time. "Pack a bag tonight," I say as I enjoy myself watching her dress.

She stops with one arm in her coat. "Why?"

"Because I'm taking you away. Ten days, somewhere warm. Somewhere neither of our families has business or anyone who owes them money. Constantine's already booked the flights."

"Constantine has." She turns around. "And when was I going to be asked?"

"You weren't. Asking has never been the quick way to get anything done." I sit up against the headboard and enjoy watching her temper climb.

"So you've booked us a honeymoon."

"Not a honeymoon. We're not married. You keep reminding me." I reach for my watch. "It's a holiday. We never had one the first time. I married you, and a week later we were at war. You're owed ten days on a beach where nobody's trying to put anyone in the ground. The honeymoon comes later, once you let me put a ring back on your finger."

Her expression changes, and she's back being herself. I know she's not pleased with me, but this time around I was willing to take a risk.

"You don't get to decide things for me anymore." She waves a hand at me. "That was the whole point, Laszlo. You know it was."

"I know." I learned that one the hard way. "So I'm not forcing you onto the plane. I'm asking. There's a bag, there's a flight, and there's a beach where nobody wants either of us dead. Come, or stay and nothing changes. Either way I'm still yours. I love you, always will. But only one of those options gets you ten days of me with my phone off and no funerals to run to." I look at her. "It's your choice. It's always your choice now. You made sure of that the night you burned our house down."

Our house, not my house. I want her to understand that. She crosses the room, takes my face in both hands, and kisses me like she wants me feeling it through every hour of the surgery I'm not invited to.

"I'll pack a bag," she says against my mouth.

"Good girl."

"You're insufferable." She’s already turning for the stairs.

"And yet you keep coming back."

Then she's gone. Her heels on the stairs, the front door, the familiar cough of her car starting up. The house goes quiet around me. Not the empty quiet of last year. The quiet of a place she's coming back to.

* * *

I've got a man open on my table by mid-morning: a fool who died owing three families money he never had. Cleanest thing that ever happened to him, if you ask me. I work. Hands are steady for a change. Well, all my disturbing episodes have stopped the moment Manon came back, my head is quiet. All I can think about right now is the beach and Manon packing our bags without any order or plan.

There's not a single one of my men following her—that won’t change. I’ll keep my word, even now that she's back in my bed. It's the hardest thing I've ever made myself do because everything in me wants her protected. I just want it to be her choice more than mine. I am the most powerful man in New York, and no matter what I will find the compromise.

I'm halfway through rebuilding the man's jaw, moving mechanically. My mind’s not really in it. Instead I'm thinking about all the places I’m going to take her. I’m going to make sure she gets the sleep she needs and a good dose of sunshine. I'm a fucking lost cause.

Then my phone rings. I look at the screen and frown. Why is Manon calling so soon? I strip off a glove and answer.

For a moment there's nothing—just breathing and a car engine somewhere behind it. Then a man starts to speak, and I catch the accent right away.

It’s from the old country. Not the American-raised sort, but the kind belonging to someone who comes over with blood already on him.

"Mr. Novak, we have your wife."

I want to bark at the man that she is not my wife, but the air leaves my lungs. For seven years I kept her at arm's length so no one could ever do exactly this—reach me through her. I let her back in last night. And here it is already, the nightmare I have convinced myself that could never happen.

I put the scalpel down.

"I'm listening," I say.

As he speaks, I rule out Polish. I think Russian, at first, but I've done enough business with men from that part of the world to hear the difference. It's Ukrainian. Fuck, I got distracted again. I thought I had time to resolve the Ferro situation. The wild card. The person behind every problem I currently have.

"Good." A slow breath, almost bored. "Here's how your morning goes, Mr. Novak. There's a scrapyard off Kearny. I'm sure you know the place I'm talking about. Three PM sharp. You come alone, and we talk about your lovely wife. Anything else, and I send her to you in a box."

I don't say a word because I'm listening to the bastard, to the noises in the background—the engine, the road noise, trying to gauge how far they've already driven.

"They told me you’re a serious man," he says, when I stay quiet. "Three nights ago we sent you a girl. You worked on her yourself, I hear. That was us saying hello."

The fire. The girl I spent a whole night worrying she was Manon. I'd told myself it was someone else's mess, bad luck, a body that wasn't my business. They were testing me, and I did not get it.

"Three PM. Alone." The line dies.

I give myself one second. One, where I let myself picture her in the back of a van, in distress. Terrified.

I'm pulling my coat on when the phone goes again. This time it's fucking Henri.

I answer while walking to the car. "I know and I'm taking care of it."

"You know." He seems angry, but that's understandable. "My man watched three of them put my daughter in a van twenty minutes ago and could do nothing but call it in."

I stop on the stairs. "Your man. You kept someone on her."

"When I heard she didn’t have a security detail, I decided to be proactive." I should be mad at him for his unspoken criticism, but not today. "Whoever

took her didn't waste time. They grabbed her off a busy gas station lot in daylight. She was going in for coffee."

"And your man sat in his car and watched. So we've both failed her this morning. Save the rest for later and tell me what he saw."

He wants her back more than he wants to fight with me right now, so he ignores my jabs. "Grey panel van. Half a plate, six, two something. Three men. They went east, toward the river."

Henri said east, but the meeting location the kidnapper gave me is at Kearny, which is west. If they were holding her there, they'd have driven her that way. But they drove the opposite direction.

So Kearny is where I'm supposed to walk in alone and get shot. She's east, by the river and there's one building out there that belonged to Ferro. A dead cannery. I have kept tabs on Ferro assets for years.

I call Rafe. "Six men to the Kearny scrapyard. Let them see you coming, but not a minute before three. I want them counting heads, sure I'm about to walk through the gate." I'm already in the car, my man in the passenger seat. "Tomek's with me. Nobody goes near the waterfront until I call."

I don't wait for an answer. I drop the phone in the center console and pull into the road, driving east, toward my wife, toward a danger that exists because I loved her enough to leave her unguarded.

They should have thought twice about doing this.

Now I'm coming for them, the Laszlo Novak they’d never want to meet.

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# CHAPTER 38

Manon

Someone pulls the blindfold off my face and the light goes through my skull like a blade.

For a moment there's nothing but white and the taste of the gag, cotton and something chemical clinging to the back of my throat, then the room drags itself into focus around me.

I'm in some kind of abandoned building. Bare concrete, a high, damaged ceiling and gray morning light coming through a number of holes. It's freezing, and it stinks of old water and dead fish. I don't need anyone to tell me I'm down by the river, in one of those empty places where nobody comes and nobody would hear me.

There are three men in the room. Two of them stand by the door, talking in low tones. The third is crouched right in front of me, close enough to touch, one hand still on the knot he's just untied at the back of my head.

I check myself over. It's what I do all day, just never on myself.

My wrists are taped together in my lap and my ankles are taped to the chair. My head is throbbing on the left where one of them hit me, and I don't remember the drive here at all. I have no idea how long I've been gone, or whether Laszlo even knows yet. He probably doesn't. He pulled all the surveillance off me, so he has no way of knowing I've been taken.

I'm not even remotely scared because I'm too furious to be. I waited a year. A whole miserable year, and I finally went back to him last night. I thought I finally had it all. The trip coming up, a proper proposal, the stupid perfect happily ever after with my unhinged Laszlo Novak. But no, I had to be kidnapped instead. These idiots took me on my way to work. I could scream. Part of me wants to, just to see if any of them so much as flinches.

They didn't even search me properly. Barely a pat down, the assholes. They think a doctor won't be any trouble. They have no idea they're dealing with the wrong woman.

Because there's something in my chest pocket they missed. A small, familiar weight I clipped there myself at the end of a long shift and forgot to throw away, the way I do two or three times a week without thinking.

A scalpel.

He crouches in front of me like he has all day, and I look at him and think about how much I want to hurt him.

I think I'm starting to lose it, because all I feel is this loud, roaring need to take this man apart for what he's done to my morning, my plans, the rest of my life. I was supposed to be thinking about what I was going to pack right now. After work, I'd go home and eat and probably fuck my ex-husband senseless to make up for lost time. Instead, I'm sitting here tied to a chair.

"Comfortable?" He smirks, the son of a bitch. "No. I don't imagine so."

The first thing that throws me is his voice, and the fact that he doesn't have any accent at all. I was expecting the heavy Eastern European voices of the men who threw me in the van, but this one sounds homegrown American. He looks young and ordinary too, not the kind of man you'd link to any of this. For some reason that leaves me more disturbed than scared.

The thick accents and the big silent men, those I can read. This one is different. He's calm, polite and reasonable, so much it makes my skin crawl.

"May I have some water?" I ask, partly for my dry mouth, partly because the longer he's talking to me, the less panicky I feel. "Or is hospitality not part of the package?"

He smiles like I've said something charming. Then he stands, takes out his phone, and points the camera at my face, a little red light blinking on.

"Do me a favor," he says. "Smile. Tell the camera what a lovely husband you have."

"He's not my husband. We're divorced." I keep my voice flat. "So whatever you think you've got here, you've got it wrong."

"Manon Valmont. A respected surgeon. You take your coffee black, and you left home at eight-thirty-five this morning to go and do your job." He tilts the phone toward me. "I know exactly who you are, and I know exactly what you are to him, divorce or no divorce. Now smile for the camera."

“Okay. Give me a moment please?” I sound suitably chastised. I just have to keep playing the frightened woman, and that isn't hard. The young, educated mafia man with no accent seems to buy it as he turns around and takes a few paces away from me. As his back is to me, I lift my hands and twist them to work my fingers inside the pocket. Retrieving the blade, I return my tied hands to my lap.

"You don't know me." He returns to me, his stride leisurely, like he's got all the time in the world. "That's all right. Nobody does yet. My stepfather and brother have had business ties in this city for thirty years. And for the last decade and a half, your husband has burned our shipments, taken our routes, and murdered our men. They sat there and took it because they wanted to focus on running things back home, so they let him have it all." He stops. "But I was born here. I don't care about Ukraine, so I want what’s mine. I want it all. But first, somebody needs to teach your husband a lesson."

I keep my fingers still around the scalpel. I want to ask him what he did to my husband—my *ex*-husband—to warrant such treatment, but I don’t want to piss him off yet.

“A year ago I hired a man and gave him an assignment. To infiltrate Novak’s house and make it seem he was from Ferro’s. Getting the key was easy. Ferro’s money man, Patrick, sold it to me, along with the poor bastard it belonged to. He did the cutting himself and never once asked who was paying. I hear Novak put him in a box this week.” He shrugs. “Saves me the

bother. Anyway, my man’s job was to leave a small souvenir for you. I heard Novak is a fool when it comes to his woman, so I figured he’d go apeshit. Unfortunately he still hasn’t figured out who. And now I’m tired of waiting. Your divorce threw a wrench in the works, then his funeral home went up in smoke—that wasn’t me, by the way. They haven’t caught the culprit yet.” He puts his hands in his pockets. “Such a waste of time.”

He shakes his head and stares at me. I bite on my bottom lip to keep myself from speaking. “He never found my man. He was so good I hired him full time. Blue's outside on the door right now. You walked past him on the way in."

He turns and starts to pace again. I press the edge of the scalpel to the tape at my wrists and start sawing, small movements, shoulders still. When he turns back, I keep going, my eyes on his face so he keeps watching mine instead of my hands.

"So let me get this straight," I say, because as long as he's listening to me, he's not looking down. "You took me and brought me to … what? A fish factory. To send a message to Laszlo." I laugh, and it comes out ugly. "Does your family even know you're doing this? You seem so young, like you’re just old enough to order a beer. Or is this the part where you prove you're not the disappointment they think you are?"

That gets him. Something moves behind his eyes, so I keep my mouth running.

"That's it, isn't it. They have no trust in you. Don’t think you’re capable of this business. Granted, it’s not for the faint of heart. So now you're going to take Laszlo's wife and hope Daddy finally claps and pats you on the back."

"You think you're the first to try that on me." Crouching in front of me again, he grabs my chin and turns my face toward the little red light. "He'll come for you. He already thinks he knows where. My men are standing in an empty yard on the other side of the city right now, with a surprise waiting for him."

The tape finally gives. I grind my teeth. He thinks he can outsmart Laszlo. I don't believe he can pull that off in any manner, but I'm still afraid. I don't want him to die before we get the chance to start over.

I keep my wrists together like they're still taped, the scalpel hidden flat against my palm, even though my hands are free now.

I have to hand it to him—he's trying hard, bless him, but I feel more ready now to do whatever it takes to get back to the life he's trying to take from me.

"You've made one mistake," I tell him.

"Have I?"

"You shouldn't have underestimated me."

My hand comes up out of my lap and I ram the scalpel into the side of his neck.

He jerks back half a second too early. The blade catches him under the ear and rips down along his jaw instead of going deep, and the blood comes fast, spraying hot across my face and hands and his collar. Too high. I went too high. He shrieks, then throws himself at me.

His whole weight hits me and the chair goes over backward, me still taped to it at the ankles, the back of my head cracking off the concrete. His hands find my throat. His blood is pouring off his face and onto mine, and he's screaming something I can't hear over my own pulse.

Behind him the other two are sprinting toward us.

Then something hits the door so hard it tears off its hinges and crashes down onto the concrete, and the whole space explodes into chaos. There are men shouting and boots pounding across the floor, then the gunfire starts. Each shot slams through my teeth, chest, and the floor under my back.

I can't see any of it. All I can see is the face above me, blood everywhere, his eyes wild.

And his grip tightens around my throat.

I claw at his wrists as the room keeps roaring around us, and somewhere close a man screams then goes quiet. My eyesight starts to blur, and a thought arrives with a calm that scares me more than the panic did: that this

is how it ends, here on a filthy floor, and I don't even get to see Laszlo one last time.

Then the weight is torn off me all at once, and the hands leave my throat. The air comes rushing back into my lungs so fast it actually hurts.

I roll onto my side, coughing, dragging air back in while the gray clears out of my vision. Somewhere above the ringing in my ears there's one more gunshot, then the noise in my head resumes. The concrete floor is cold against my back, yet it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters when Laszlo appears in front of me.

He drops blood beside me. His hands are on my face, my neck, my shoulders, moving fast, and they're shaking. Bloodied and shaking. I've never felt his hands shake.

"Manon." His fingers move over my throat, jaw, and chest now, checking me like I would, looking for wounds this amount of blood would result in. "Where? Where are you hurt?"

"It's not mine." The words are torn from my throat. "The blood. It's not mine."

My legs are still taped to a chair and I’m soaked in a man's blood, but I start to laugh because he found me. And I'm alive.

“That man.”

“Dead,” he says firmly, “and buried.”

"You're late," I tell him. "Luckily I had my scalpel on me."

Laszlo unties me, then holds his free hand out to me and pulls me up. I see he’s holding a gun. Looking at the man on the floor, who’s barely breathing, he then turns to me. “He hurt you,” he says simply. “But this time I’ll let you decide.” He offers me the gun.

“I don’t need that.”

With absolute clarity, I know what I have to do. I feel like I am finally at peace with myself. I kneel beside the man who was going to kill me and my

husband, and put my hand on his jaw. The adrenaline is still rushing through my blood. I lick my lips, knowing that Laszlo is watching.

"I told you," I say to him, "you shouldn't have underestimated me."

I slash his throat in one motion while his eyes go frantic. His mouth falls open and a gurgling sound comes out as he bleeds to death. Laszlo's hand closes over mine on the scalpel as I do it, steadying the cut, finishing it with me.

Both of us. Together.

For a moment, neither of us moves. The building has gone completely silent. There's a dead man under my hands, his blood soaking through my scrubs and up my arms, and I'm losing my breath.

Then I look up at Laszlo, kneeling in the mess of it with me, and a year of missing him rips my chest open. I drop the scalpel and grab him, crushing him to me.

I fist both hands in his shirt and drag his mouth down to mine, and he groans and kisses me back like a man possessed, one hand knotting in my hair, the other spanning my lower back and hauling me up off my knees and into him. I can feel his whole body against me. This feeling … this feeling I've missed so much.

"I thought I'd lost you." He says into my mouth, kissing my jaw and then my throat. "That phone call nearly gave me a heart attack. I'm going to have to restore some security, *ma macabre*."

"You didn't lose me." I'm pushing his coat off his shoulders, tearing his belt open, sliding a hand in his pants. His cock is thick, hot and hard in my hand. He groans, the sound sending electric waves to my core. "Wait, are we alone?"

"Everyone's dead," he rasps, touching me all over like a man possessed. "Tomek's in the car, eating snacks. I told him to wait outside when the three men here were taken care of. The rest took care of the bastard's men on the other side of the city. We're good for a bit. Now where were we?"

"Here. This.” I grab his hand and put it against my breast. “I need you inside me. Fuck me, Laszlo. Fuck me hard next to that bastard's body."

He lifts me like I weigh nothing and I lock my legs around his waist. My back hits the concrete wall. I want the bruises, I want to feel this for days. His mouth is on my throat, his teeth sinkingt in as he yanks my scrubs and underwear down off my hips, then discards his pants. Then his hand is between my thighs, two fingers dragging up through me, and he swears against my neck because I'm already soaking wet.

"That's my girl," he murmurs in a gravelly voice. "You opened a man's throat and it got you this wet."

"Shut up and fuck me."

He holds me steady with an arm around my waist as he guides his cock to my entrance. I push down into him because I cannot wait one more second. My breathing is frantic, my heart is pounding hard in my chest as he fills me to the brim.

He drives into me in one hard stroke and I cry out, the stretch of him white-hot, so deep and so full my knees nearly go.

He doesn't let me adjust. He just fucks me, deep and brutal, every thrust snapping my back and hips into the wall and punching the air out of me. It’s almost too much and exactly enough, so I take every stroke, greedy for it. His free hand fists in my hair and pulls. I arch into him, wanting, needing. He puts his mouth to my ear.

"Look at what you did." He groans, so filthy. "You sliced his throat with a scalpel, then begged me to fuck you next to his body. Look at the mess you made." He drives in so hard it lifts me higher against the wall. I moan loudly, lost to the sensations. "You think there's one inch of you I don't want? The blood on you right now is making me lose my fucking mind."

Every word he says breaks me apart, but I want more. I crave more darkness. My whole life I've pretended I'm not this person—that I don't want it dark, don't want it rough, that the worst parts of me don't fill me with desire. But he’s saying the truth out loud, while buried to the hilt in

me, and it's the hottest thing anyone has ever done to me. I clench around his cock as he groans against my neck.

"You're a filthy slut who needs to be taught a lesson," he says. "*Ma macabre* … you like that I see you. That I've always seen you."

"Yes." The word tears out of me. "God, yes."

He keeps fucking me until I can't breathe, but when he slows down, I realize I need to see his face when I come.

"Let's get on the floor," I can barely get the word out. "Let me ride you."

He pulls out of me and I nearly sob at the loss, but barely a moment later he's lying flat on his back on the cold concrete, in the chaos of what we've done, pulling me down over him. I sink down onto his cock in one slow, deep slide and we both cry out. I start riding him, setting the pace, raking my bloodied hands down his chest. I don't even care how uncomfortable it is.

Laszlo reaches out to squeeze my breasts, then pinches both of my nipples. I ride him exactly the way I want, rolling my hips, taking him deep and grinding down until I'm working myself against him. This man, who controls the world around us, lies there and lets me use him, his eyes black, his hands gripping my thighs hard. At my mercy.

"That's it." His voice trembles. "Take what you need. Take all of it."

I ride him faster, harder, chasing it, my whole body coiling tighter with every drop of my hips. Putting a thumb to my clit, he presses and circles, reducing my entire existence to that little spot, taking me straight over the edge.

I come so hard the room goes white, clenching around him wave after wave, his name the only word I have left. He grips my hips and drives up into me through all of it, riding me through the first orgasm and straight into a second I didn't feel coming. Then it's his turn to fall apart, spilling into me with a guttural sound. His body shudders under mine.

I collapse down onto his chest, both of us slick and shaking and dragging air, his heart slamming against my cheek, his arms wrapping around me so

tightly it's like he still can't believe he gets to hold me.

For a long time, neither of us moves. There's nothing left in me that needs to.

Laszlo presses his mouth to my hair and breathes me in.

"We should go," he says eventually. “Tomek’s waiting.”

"In a minute."

"You're covered in blood."

"So are you." I turn my head and find the pulse at his throat with my lips, just to feel it beating, to feel him alive. "I've never minded the blood."

I've spent my whole life pretending to be someone easier to love. I left my family at eighteen and created a life away from all this violence, and the manipulation. I let a good man believe I was a good, ordinary woman for four years. And when the darkness in me finally had a name, I ran from that too, all the way to Europe and back, and let a nice, ordinary man take me to dinner to prove I could still want the quiet version of everything. I couldn't. Laszlo is the only person alive I've never had to be someone else for. With him, I’m always myself. Whether I’m quiet Manon, surgeon Manon, spitfire Manon, or crazy Manon—he’ll take me anyhow. Nobody's ever going to make me feel the way this man does.

My mother chose sensible. She got forty years of a life that was never hers and the garden as her only hobby. I don't want to end up like her.

I look at the dead man on the floor, and at the ruined, impossible man holding me like he'll never let go, the one I burned a house to get free of and drove across a city to get back to. I turn in his arms and kiss him hard.

Let my mother keep her forty careful years.

I'll take him. Blood and all.

The End

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