

RUTHLESS PARADISE BOOK 3

CHANCELLOR

LEXI RAY

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Editor: Tracy Liebchen

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RUTHLESS PARADISE SERIES

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PLAYLIST

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We Are Young—Boyce Avenue
Need to Change—Landon Tewers
Fairy Tale—Seori
I Love You, I Hate You—Little Simz
Make Me (Cry)—Noah Cyrus, Labrinth
Lie—Halsey, Quavo
Liar—Noah Cyrus
Euthanasia—Post Malone

You can find the playlist on [Spotify](#).

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ARCHER CRONE

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TWO YEARS AGO / ZION ISLAND

THE BEST THING ABOUT THE CONGRESSMAN'S DAUGHTER IS HER MOUTH.

The worst thing about her mouth is that sticky baby-pink gloss, now smeared on my hard-on as she slowly but steadily gets me closer to release.

Anna Reich is as diligent at everything she does as her daddy at his job in the government. Just as unimaginative. As calculating. But toiling away for the cause, day after day.

In her case—me.

And not because I brought the golden children to this luxury paradise and we are about to take this party to my yacht. But because her father very much wants to stay friends with mine, hoping his daughter will one day become part of my family. In three months, I will graduate from Deene and start full-time on Gen-Alpha Project—pharmaceuticals are a sure path to having ten figures in my bank account within a couple of years.

“Faster, doll face,” I urge Anna, feeling the climax approaching.

She is almost as good at this as one of my dad's ex-assistants, Jenna, who didn't care who she screwed—the Secretary of Defense or his son.

Spring Break is in full swing. After four days of partying, we still have almost a week to go. The ocean around Zion Island is soaked with champagne and horny frat boys' semen. Yachts are trashed. Girls are sunburnt. Guys want more. Eardrums bleed from constant music blasting from luxury villas and party decks all across the west side of Ayana Resort.

Twenty. Four. Seven.

At this point, my hands grab Anna's head a little too tightly, and I have to watch myself because—“*Sweets, don't you fucking ruin my hair*”—every

sexual encounter with her has rules and restrictions.

For a change, I think of Ashley Hurst, who suntanned on my yacht naked the day before and, in seconds, unload into Anna's mouth.

Gracefully, she wipes her swollen mouth with her thumb as she gets off her knees. Doesn't even look at me like she is an escort, doing a job. Honestly, most escorts I've had were more enthusiastic than her.

"Wanna take it to bed?" I ask as I tuck myself into my jeans, knowing the answer in advance and cringing at the feel of lipgloss on my fingers.

"Ugh," Anna murmurs, brushing her knees that are red below her canary-yellow Marchesa cocktail dress.

She doesn't want to fuck. That's becoming a habit, and we've only been together for less than a year.

"You'll ruin my dress or my makeup, and then I'll have to take a shower..."

She keeps talking while fixing her lips and golden ponytail in front of the mirror as I pick up my abandoned drink from the night stand and loudly swish the liquid in my mouth. Mostly, to drown out her voice.

My phone rings.

"Bro, you coming or what?" It's Qi Shan, high as a kite and buzzed by the sound of it. "Dude," he corrects himself, knowing well only one person called me "bro" in the past, and I am waiting patiently for his grand appearance. Any day. Any hour. Kai Droga landed in Port Mrei two days ago.

Bitterness curls my lips at the thought as I snap, "Wait for me."

"Take a speed boat, catch us later maybe? Drew already took a group to the *Empress*. We are taking it around the island or possibly to the island next door."

Impatient fucker. No one is taking my yacht without me. Drew Wiesselstein brought his own from Tortola.

"Just wait, will you?" I crack my neck, annoyed. "Anna is taking forever."

"Asshole," she murmurs from the mirror.

Cliff Villa is the biggest one on this island. Naturally, it's where Anna and I are staying. Granted, my father owns Ayana, and the self-sustaining small resort on the Eastside, as well as several businesses in Port Mrei, the town up north.

The music on my party deck outside is so loud that I can feel the stone structure of the house vibrate.

“Let’s roll,” I snap at Anna as I leave the bedroom, cross the living room, and walk out through the sliding doors onto the deck.

The warm salty night air laced with the smell of wine and cigars wafts into my face as loud music assaults my eardrums. The change between the quiet cool interior and the blasting party in full swing by my pool is so drastic that it makes me smile.

I like this shit. Loud. Drowning the dark thoughts in my head that occasionally get too overwhelming.

Once I start at Gen-Alpha Project full-time, there will be no rest for the wicked. Seven board members of the company are some of the richest people in the world. I have much to prove, way more than I already have.

So, now is my last chance to party like there is no tomorrow. This Spring Break is special. Or will be, when *he* gets here.

Ty and Marlow, with their shirts unbuttoned and bottles of booze in their hands, dance on a podium as several half-naked girls swing their hips and grind at their legs.

People crowd the infinity pool that glows neon-blue.

Girls squeal in excitement as Guff jumps in the water, splashing everyone around.

Cliff Villa is one of many at this resort that’s booming with music and loud cheers. Bottles and glasses are everywhere, so are clothes, bikinis, and passed-out bodies. Laser lights shoot into the dark sky above the island from all directions. The crowd is already out of control, though it’s only nine in the evening.

Taking a hundred elite students to a tropical island might be the biggest party I’ve had yet, despite the random faces I don’t recognize—Dad’s guests for who-the-fuck knows what reason who flew from Europe and Asia.

“Let’s roll, yo!” Axavier yells at me from the distance, motioning for me to grab Ty and Marlow.

And then the music cuts off.

In another second, the villa and deck around go pitch black.

“Boooooo!” Collective gasps and complaints echo through the abrupt darkness and silence that are too eerie.

“Archer!” Anna’s capricious voice is behind me. “What happened?”

“Bring back the light!” someone barks.

“Bring back the light!” the rest repeat in chorus.

The drunk crowd starts chanting.

A generator kicks in, bringing the lights in the villa back, but there is still no music, and the faces in the crowd are disappointed.

There must be something with the circuit.

Shit.

We are about to head to the yacht, but I need to find Bo, the resort manager, and tell him to fix this before we come back.

“One moment,” I snap at Anna and make my way, veering among the bodies, back toward the house.

And then I see *him*.

Kai. Fucking. Droga.

A ghost.

Finally.

He stands at a distance, by the sliding door to the villa, precisely where I was going, like he’s been watching me. Hands in his pockets, he towers like the fucking Dark Knight.

My heart gives a loud thud inside my chest.

I knew he’d come.

Now I know the reason for the blackout—it’s revenge, six feet of it, muscled and full of spite.

I slow my steps, walking toward him, my best friend-turned-enemy.

It’s the first time I’ve seen him in over a year, and the first proper encounter since the fire two years ago.

Adrenalin shoots through my veins.

In this moment, I don’t give a shit about the party or the yacht. This guy was the cause of my pain, guilt, and hatred for the last two years. I lured him to this island thanks to Qi Shan. Of course, Droga came for revenge, way past due. But I have other plans.

“Well, well, what a surprise,” I drawl as I come to a complete stop about ten feet away, studying him.

He is wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans, so I can’t see much of his body, but what I do see in the terrace light is enough—his arms down to his knuckles and up to his neck are tatted up almost completely. Covering his burn scars.

Fuck...

The sight of him—knowing that it's somewhat my fault—gives me the reality check that makes my jaw clench tightly and my arrogant attitude falter under his gaze.

We used to be like brothers. But his stare is murderous now as he starts walking toward me, then charges at me so fast that I don't realize what's happening until a brutal punch to my face knocks me to the ground.

Pain shoots through my nose, the impact so powerful it cuts off my breathing for a moment.

I see stars.

A kick in my gut makes the world stop.

I hear screams and shouts.

Adrenalin shoots through my veins, and before the dizziness goes away, I jump to my feet and blindly throw myself at him, sending punches anywhere I can.

"You fucking trash," he snaps as he punches me in the ribs.

"Traitor," I hiss as I punch back.

He might have been a star wrestler once, but I am a quarterback. We smash our fists into each other blindly, repeatedly, until we are suddenly jerked away from each other. Qi Shan holds me back, keeping me from lunging at Droga, as Ty and Marlow hold Droga, who is like a bull, trying to charge forward.

Panting, I smile, feeling the metallic taste of blood in my mouth, blood dripping from my nose.

Blood and hate—all that's left of our friendship.

But I feel alive.

A crowd gathers around us. Some of them know Droga and our story. But no one really knows how he ended up here. *He* doesn't know that either.

I grin at the thought, though my split lip hurts.

"Hello, Droga." I swish my tongue in my mouth, collecting the bloodied saliva, and spit on the ground.

He might've come to fight, but he did what I fucking planned, and I won't let him go until he cools his fists and we sort this shit out. The shit that was started by a fucking girl.

I smile because we finally get to face each other after two years of the silent war. And because I am actually glad to see the motherfucker—the one person who ever understood me and didn't kneel or kiss my ass for favors.

I'll aggravate him until he is drained of all that hatred he's collected since the accident.

And because maybe this time, if we talk, I can get the fucking guilt off my chest. The guilt for what happened and what I've done.

"You fucking scum," Droga hisses, trying to get rid of Ty and Marlow.

I grin wider, chuckling devilishly.

Someone murmurs something about the cut connection. The muffled music at other Ayana villas goes quiet.

Did this sneaky fucker cut the electricity everywhere? Genius.

"Keep it going," I spit at Droga. "Tell me what else you got to say, baby."

We need to talk. Once he spits out all the poison, we'll get to business.

But suddenly the phones in everyone's pockets start ringing. Almost all at once.

It's not the usual ringing. It's the emergency alert sound.

Dozens of them in the crowd.

Mine in my pocket.

More of them in the distance, like an echo.

Uneasiness sweeps through the crowd as everyone searches for their phones, forgetting about us.

I feel the grip around my arms loosen. Ty and Marlow let go of Droga and dig for their phones.

"What the fuck?" someone murmurs.

I tear my gaze off Droga, who doesn't charge at me but instead looks around, confused.

"What's happening?" I ask, wiping my nose with my thumb and turning toward Qi Shan, who raises his eyes off his phone in shock.

"A nuclear bomb," he whispers.

"What?" I frown, digging in my pocket for my phone.

A collective "Fuuuuck" whispers in the air.

"Holy shit. New York is getting attacked," someone murmurs.

There is another round of buzzing cut-razor alerts coming from everyone's phones.

I pull mine out, the screen flashing.

EMERGENCY ALERT.

**BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO NEW YORK.
SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.**

What...

Half of us go to Deene University, but we are from different cities and parts of the world. Emergency alerts are usually area coded. Not this time. In a second, someone else's phone buzzes.

"Chicago is under attack," some guy says in a quiet voice that sounds like a scream.

"London, too."

"Moscow."

"Delhi."

Anna covers her mouth with her palm, muffling a whimper and gaping at me in shock.

Everything goes completely quiet.

The entire island.

It feels like a cemetery.

We frantically stab the dial buttons and press the phones to our ears, but there is nothing, and we gape around in shock, searching for answers.

"The signal just dropped," someone says.

No shit.

"There is no reception. None. Not even on a satellite app."

Can't be.

"Archer!"

I turn to see Bo, the resort manager, jump off the golf cart and run toward me, a satellite phone in his hand.

"What's happening?" I ask.

He stabs the phone in my chest. "Secretary Crone."

Dad? On a resort satellite phone? This is bad news.

I grab it from Bo's hands and press it to my ear, holding my breath under everyone's frozen gazes, eyes on me.

"Yeah?" My voice is so low it's almost a whisper.

"Archer!" Dad's voice is interrupted by crackling and the sirens in the background.

"Dad, what's going on?" I frown, realizing they sound like civil defense sirens.

Dad's next words obliterate anything else that happened in the last hour or the plans we had for the next one or the nearest future. If we have one.

The words that no one ever wants to hear in their lifetime.

His voice is calm but sharp when he says, “The United States just signed a declaration of war. Now, son, I need you to listen to me carefully.”

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KATURA ORTIZ

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A MONTH AGO / MAINLAND

WOULD IT BE SO BAD TO SCREW THE MAN YOU ARE SENT TO SPY ON?

When he looks like a Greek God.

Built like the Vitruvian Man.

IQ over 170.

The son of the Secretary of Defense.

Forbes 30 Under 30.

A twenty-four-year-old chemistry prodigy.

Former star-quarterback of Deene University.

Single.

The list of achievements—and in my books being single with this outstanding record is a warning sign—is so long that Archer Crone, aka the Chancellor, the king of Zion Island, sounds like a unicorn. With a penetrating gaze, chiseled cheekbones, and a cold demeanor that hides more trauma than the happy life money can buy—a freak accident that killed his mother and younger brother more than ten years ago.

Is it normal to be attracted to a guy you've never met?

I calculate the odds of getting on his radar.

Since the Change, Zion is armed to a tee and guarded by the world's best contractors. I am nineteen, raised and trained by a military father, but Archer Crone probably thinks I am a pretty, feisty girl who is pissing in her pants with the excitement of being selected to come to the island. Granted, he approves the final applicants himself.

Yeah. Archer Crone is a ten, but he knows my dirty laundry. My records don't shine so brightly, yet I won the golden ticket.

Sleeping with the enemy, my future boss...

I entertain the idea until my stomach tightens. I smile like a dummy. My nerves are on edge. The adrenaline makes my skin tingle.

I study Archer Crone's photo in the file on my lap as I sit in the backseat of the pickup truck as my dad and uncle drive me to the Transfer Center. From there, I am off with the several selected to be taken to Zion Island.

Zion is a mystery. A hundred elite students from Deene University went there on Spring Break the week when the world's most powerful nations snapped and pressed the red buttons, turning half the globe into a battlefield. Over a hundred nukes didn't destroy the world, despite what most people had thought. To be fair, over a hundred above-ground nukes were tested in Nevada in the last century. It didn't kill us. Didn't harm Las Vegas either.

But an actual war is different.

The nukes hit the major infrastructure points, data centers, and military bases. The US was affected the most. Ironical, considering once we were the world police and now the world's pity.

Martial law, internment camps, nationwide hunger, humanitarian crisis, gun violence that escalated with the lack of policing, a banking system crash, medical and sanitary disasters, and—too fresh to still remember the previous one—world lockdown that's been in place for over two years now.

You name it, we have it.

A new nuclear pact was signed recently, like it would do any good, because there was already one such pact before the Change.

"You've been staring at the picture for a while, kiddo. What's up?"

I lift my eyes to see my uncle's narrowed eyes on me from his front seat.

How long has he been studying me?

How long have I been staring at Zion's own Tony Stark?

Was I smiling the entire time?

Ugh. I've been burning holes in Archer Crone's picture for some time. Yeah, I can't help it. The idea of meeting him is making me anxious and... excited.

My uncle's gaze is prying as I snap the file closed and put it aside.

"Nothing reckless, Kat, got it?" he says, not turning away. "Don't get involved with him in... You know what I mean."

I know.

I run my hand over my dark thick hair, half-braided at the scalp and the rest of it loose and cascading down my back, then bring a strand over my shoulder and curl it around my finger.

Uncle's eyes follow my hand, and I drop it, annoyed.

I roll my eyes. We've discussed this for two months while waiting for the results of the application to go to Zion Island. Only seven are selected every three or four months. Chances are one in a thousand. Most of the selected are skilled and talented, but all of them young.

I was lucky. Anyone selected is.

Zion is a fortress. No outsiders are allowed except for the businessmen and the powerful family members of the Ayana residents, who fly there on private jets and helicopters while the mainland is under martial law and the world is in lockdown. There are no rules for the rich—that part didn't change since the war.

Zion is also a home base to Gen-Alpha Project run by Archer Crone himself—a pharmaceutical company that develops the formula and manufactures the drug to stop genetic mutation caused by fallout. A drug only affordable to the richest one percent. Shocker.

There are rumors and stories about Zion. But none of the spring-breakers who returned from there—a handful is all—talk about it.

And here I am, twenty minutes from the Transfer Center that will take me and the lucky others to paradise.

"This is a job, Kat. Not a game," Uncle says for the hundredth time, his eyes never leaving mine.

We've discussed the plan of me getting to Zion and finding the mobster princess for weeks. I know the map of the island, the logistics, its organization, and even some of the spring-breakers and their family history.

"I am not a kid," I say with confidence.

I've studied this case for months. I might have my own ideas of how to work my way into the inner circle—Archer Crone specifically. But I don't need to tell my dad and uncle that.

Uncle doesn't blink. "You are. For this sort of job, you are."

"Dad was eighteen when he applied to join the SEALs." So was Uncle, seven years my father's junior.

"That was physical training. Yours is a whole different scenario."

"I learned a lot in Thailand."

Uncle's gaze darkens, and Dad's eyes dart up to meet mine in the rearview mirror. He guns the engine—the movement that gives away his momentary bitterness at my words.

Shit, I should've kept my mouth shut.

"You might have," Uncle says with coldness. "And you got too close to something that would've traumatized you for life."

Yeah, three years in Bangkok with my dad taught me a lot. But what he's referring to was the one night when I thought I was the shit, despite being barely sixteen, and let others put me in danger.

We don't talk about that night in Bangkok when things went horribly wrong.

I got this. This time, I won't get in trouble.

Aleksei Tsariuk, who goes by Tsar, is not to mess with. The most powerful man in the Russian underworld believes his daughter, Milena Tsariuk, twenty-three, who disappeared before the Change, is on Zion Island of all places. He believes she went there under an alias during Spring Break. He might be right, even though he contacted the Secretary of Defense and sent a request to Archer Crone, who replied negatively. But even geniuses make mistakes.

I will have to get to know every single resident of the Ayana resort to try to locate Tsariuk's daughter, the girl who went to an American high school, speaks English with no accent, and—that's the sketchiest thing—doesn't want to be found.

And then...

Australia is the queen of the world now. If I manage to locate Milena Tsariuk, her father will get us visas and the money to buy the biggest luxury these days—the right to immigrate to the 'safe' world.

Our truck pulls up to the checkpoint of the warehouse where I am being dropped off. Dad rolls down the window and passes our papers to a security guard, who checks the passports and the medical cards, thoroughly studies the radiation report, then motions to park in the line of cars. "Only the girl is allowed beyond the parking area."

My tank top is spotted with sweat. I am nervous though it will be three days in the Transfer Center before we are even transported to the quarantined coastal area in Georgia and take the boat to Zion.

I push the file away, already wishing I could keep the picture of the Chancellor, swing my backpack over my shoulder, and jump out of the

truck.

Dad and Uncle are a head taller than me. My looks and build are from my mom, who was Ukrainian. My hair and skin are definitely from my Ortiz, Puerto Rican heritage. I look tiny compared to Dad and Uncle. But at least now, as they slowly get out of the truck and make their way to stand in front of me, I know they take me seriously. Two former military men sending a nineteen-year-old on a mission—who would've known...

"It might take a month or three or half a year to find out what we are looking for. But you are better off there than in this shithole." Uncle sucks his teeth and squints, looking around at the chain fence and barbed wire, which is a usual sight at major businesses these days.

Dad studies me calmly but clenches his jaw. "Come here."

He pulls me into a hug and holds me tightly. It's the first time in a while that he does so, not letting me go for longer than it takes my chest to tighten. The longest since... yeah, that night in Bangkok we don't talk about.

"I'll be fine, Dad," I murmur into his chest.

"Your mom would've been proud of you, Kit-Kat."

Shit.

Now my eyes burn. That's what Mom used to call me.

And he is wrong.

Mom would've never let me go. Mom would've cursed him out in Russian or Ukrainian for the mere idea and made his six-foot muscled body slump under her intimidating dark gaze, aimed at him from her five-foot-two. If Mom was around, Thailand would've never happened, and neither would Dad's year of depression, or three years in Pennsylvania.

Too many things.

I wouldn't be who I am, raised by a single dad, spending years in Thailand while he worked undercover for the counter-trafficking unit while I spent more time on the streets of Bangkok than he knew about. I wouldn't have learned what I did in the mountains of Pennsylvania where we moved before the Change. I definitely wouldn't have grown up among men, taught to think like them, fight like them, be ahead of them. I wouldn't have been ready for this. For Zion.

There is no point in thinking about the way life would've gone if Mom was still alive.

“Tragedies break us, temper us like metal, and take us on a path we are meant to be on.” Mom’s words.

“I am proud of you, kiddo,” Dad says, finally letting me go. “You’ll be fine. You got this.”

I nod, breaking out a smile and saying, “Yeah,” overly cheerfully to hide my emotions.

Uncle narrows his eyes at me. “Yeah,” he mimics me too theatrically and gives me a brief hug. “Nothing funny, Kat. Okay? Be careful.”

I raise my palm, touching my fingers to my forehead in a theatrical military salute. “Sir, yes, sir!”

Both he and Dad snort and shake their heads, their lips stretching in a smile.

“And keep your eyes on the Chancellor at all times,” Uncle says.

“I got it.” I try not to roll my eyes again.

“If anything happens, if you find yourself in a rough situation you can’t get out of, you find a way to get in contact with us.”

I cock a brow. “And?”

The island is off-limits to the public, so I am curious about what he’d do.

Uncle’s gaze gets a tad harsher. “We’ll find a way to come get you.”

Dad wraps his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me toward him and kissing the top of my head. “Go,” he says softly.

I walk away, feeling taller than the Empire State building.

There is so much ahead.

Life is unpredictable.

Right now, it’s taking me to the most rumored island in the Atlantic.

I’ll meet Archer Crone, the King of Zion.

I can’t wait.

Hopefully, I find Milena Tsariuk. Our future depends on it.

I got this.

My heart beats wildly as I give my papers yet to another guard at the doors to the Transfer Center and smile wide as I step inside.

Mr. Chancellor, here I come.

ARCHER

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NOW / ZION ISLAND

WHEN A HUNDRED OF US, THE ELITES OF DEENE UNIVERSITY, CHUGGED expensive booze on Zion Island during that fateful Spring Break two years ago, the world exploded in a nuclear war.

While we dove off our fancy yachts and floated in infinity pools, the powerful military nations pressed the red buttons.

We showered each other with champagne to the deafening sound of electronic music while the first missiles hit the Western cities, wiping millions off the face of the earth.

When the cell signal dropped and social platforms went dead, we knew something was wrong.

But by then, there was no way to reach home.

Many of us didn't have a home anymore.

Nor did we have families.

Two years have passed since the Change. Yeah, there is irony in the word that carries with it despair and horror and signifies the turning point when the almighty proved that they can jeopardize world peace for power.

The bombing stopped a long time ago. But the fallout is an invisible monster that claims thousands every day. Social collapse turns Western nations into savages. And world famine shows the West the oh-so-precious difference between living and surviving.

There's the 'safe' world—Australia, South America, Africa, and the few Western countries that didn't have nukes and therefore weren't involved.

And there is Zion.

Prosperous.

Untouched.

In two years, I made this island a safe haven. I lost people who loved me. I made a home for those who hate me. I built a pharmaceutical empire that gives hope to future generations.

Being a king is a solitary journey. To avoid insanity, I have to keep my mind at peace.

But then I meet *her*.

Katura Ortiz. A beautiful spy, sent to my island by a Russian mobster. I admit, that was a clever trick—sending a nineteen-year-old to blend in.

But now her cover is blown. So guess what?

She wants to play? We'll play.

By *my* rules.

Cliff Villa is quiet when I turn off my MTT Superbike at the entrance.

One guard is at the door. "All good, boss. Bremer is watching the back terrace. She didn't try to leave."

Katura Ortiz has spent a night in my villa under surveillance while I was in Port Mrei, sorting shit out with Droga and getting shot by his girlfriend in the process—a two-year silent war that finally came to an end this morning and still hurts like a stab in the heart.

My arm is numb from whatever Doc injected it with. My clothes are damp and smell like fucking seaweed. I haven't slept in two days. Haven't eaten anything in as long.

But I've had plenty of booze, which is wearing off, and I don't like it. Because now I feel groggy and have to deal with this Harley fucking Quinn.

The chick is unapologetically confident. She was one of seven others selected to come to Zion a month ago, and one of the lucky four who survived the boat crash, then spent weeks on the Eastside with the Outcasts.

I watched her on camera.

Studied her.

She was different.

Well, well...

I nod to the guard, letting him go, and walk in, trying to keep cool.

Creep in, to be exact, into my own fucking villa—after Amir, my business partner, gave me intel that Aleksei Tsariuk was talking to Navy SEALs about breaching Zion's security, that pretty spy who came to my island only weeks ago acquired a whole new meaning.

I thought Katura Ortiz was an unusual applicant. With her background in martial arts, Navy SEAL dad, Bangkok residence and Pennsylvania survivalist shit, she could bring some refreshing energy to this place.

Turns out—and my gut was right—she didn't come to Zion to look for work and shelter in paradise. She came *to work*. To fucking spy, to be exact, and for the biggest Russian mobster, who is looking for his missing daughter.

Inconspicuously.

Amir's words make me angry again.

Millions of dollars poured into this island's security by the almighty of this world to keep Gen-Alpha Project secure, and that Russian thug thinks he can send spies. A nineteen-year-old, to be exact. What a fucking joke.

Katura had the nerve to come. Let's see if she has the nerve to stay.

My living room is dim and empty. Usually, the gray walls and floors and the minimalistic giant rectangular space are calming. Now, Latin music trickles softly from the speakers—the pretty spy got comfortable. Probably snooping around as we speak.

She is my new entertainment. At least, if she doesn't completely piss me off, which she's done several times already in just the few days she's been on the Westside.

Katura Ortiz is only nineteen, but judging from what I've seen on cams on the Eastside, she exceeds most people her age in physical endurance and wit.

I knew it was for a reason. But I was fascinated.

More than anything, this whole thing with Droga and his girl took up my entire attention while this little spy was observing, calculating, and cleverly weaving her way in. Making friends with Marlow—surprise-surprise, the head of Zion security—I should've fucking seen it for what it was.

I kick off my wet shoes and walk across the spacious living room toward the bar to pour myself a drink—Archer's breakfast.

It's eight in the morning.

I close my eyes wearily as I take a sip.

I might tell my secretaries to handle everything and day drink. Sounds like a good idea. For a month in a row now.

Work stuff never ends. Australia. Emirates. DNA research. Blood testing. Formulas. Emails from health organizations. More emails from

Dad, or his secretary, to be exact, aka mistress—who knows, I lost touch with his personal life. I can reply, but he never looks at my emails. Like I am an outsourcing agency.

I have an urge to pull down the blinds to block the annoying happy sunshine and spend a couple of days in the dark, snorting blow, drinking, listening to old rock, and not answering the phone. My secretaries can deal with Amir or Margot. Gen-Alpha is a money-making machine by now.

I should've kept an escort here for several days longer. I need to get laid. My cock is too familiar with my right hand. Maybe, just maybe, I can get that wild kitten—

“How is everything, Mr. Chancellor?”

The voice is like a taser.

Hers.

Always cutting through my peace.

Slowly, I turn to see Katura leaning against the wall, arms crossed at her chest.

For someone who's been held up overnight, she looks fresh and cheerful. Her hair, braided at the scalp, cascades in thick waves down her front and her delicious cleavage. She is wearing Ayana resort apparel, green shorts, and a tank, exposing her slender long legs that look great but would look better over my shoulders as I fuck her raw.

“Rough morning?” she asks, studying me up and down.

After what she pulled off the night before, she needs a lesson. Or two. Or sixty-nine.

I don't need to get my drug fix to feel the rush in my veins. Her voice makes my skin crawl. It brings out my frustration. She is in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong fucking agenda that she thought would fly past me.

I walk slowly toward her as I take a sip of cognac, my eyes never leaving hers. The liquid pleasantly burns my throat. The sight of her burns through me in a strange way that surprisingly points down south. Everything about her stirs my anger, which weirdly makes me hard.

Her haughty chin tilts up in that defensive way of hers. She is good at reading people, but not as good as me. It's only a matter of time until I learn every little detail about this wild thing and wrap her around my finger.

I take the last sip and, without taking my eyes off her, set the empty glass on the shelf I am passing and approach her.

Oh, she knows she got caught. It's in her gaze that's too intense and the jaw that's clenching as she tries to project confidence that's starting to falter.

I sense it in some strange animalistic way and step into her.

She takes a step back.

But there is nowhere to go.

When her back hits the wall, my hands go up on both sides of her head.

This time, I am composed. I drained every possible emotion into the salty ocean this morning. Now we can play.

I bring my face so close to her that I can lick that haughtiness right off her lips.

There are two options.

One, to kick her off this island, possibly call Tsariuk himself and confront him, telling him his daughter is not on my island.

Option two is to find out what exactly Katura had in mind and keep her here to see what she can do, possibly let her stay in touch with Tsariuk and get some intel on him instead. Meanwhile, keeping this wild thing close. Very close.

This sounds like a lot more fun, considering we have unfinished business with this tigress. She could be my double spy. And her daddy has a lot of connections, which can be helpful if I use his daughter as collateral.

Smiling coldly, I study her face.

"And now, kitten," I say in a low voice that gives her the right idea of what Archer Crone is capable of, "I have all the time in the world for you."

She smiles hesitantly and tries to duck under my arm to get away, but I catch her with my arm around her waist and press her into the wall with my body.

"Tsk-tsk," I tease her.

The sparkle in her eyes flares up in what I think is anger. She has beautiful eyes, rimmed by ridiculously thick long eyelashes, and her haughty gaze goes straight to my cock.

"Not so fast," I hiss, inhaling the nervousness that makes her throat bob as she swallows, and I get hard in all the right places. "You are going to tell me what you are doing on Zion. And what it has to do with Aleksei Tsariuk. Start."

KAT

I KNEW SOMETHING WAS WRONG THE MOMENT ARCHER WALKED INTO HIS villa. His movements were back to normal—calculated and confident.

And now this—he brings up Aleksei Tsariuk.

Motherfucker, how?

How could he have possibly found out? My satellite phone is on the Eastside. He couldn't have possibly talked to my dad or uncle. And even if he did—granted, he does a meticulous background check on everyone who is on this island—they would've never told him.

I haven't spent even a month on this island, and my cover is blown.

Frustration washes over me, but I need to act fast.

I need Tsariuk's money.

I need those visas to Australia.

My future—and my dad's—depends on this.

Plan B. There is always a plan B.

There is too much harshness burning in Archer's eyes. But I'm an adrenaline junkie. Danger arouses me.

"Start talking, Miss Ortiz," he says coldly, and his eyes sparkle with triumph.

Miss Ortiz, huh?

"Where are Kai and Callie?" I ask instead.

"Gone."

A shiver crawls down my spine. "What did you do to them?"

"I let them go. And if you don't tell me what you came to this island for, I'll put you on the first boat to the mainland, so you can run to your Navy

SEAL daddy with your tail between your legs.”

Blackmailing me.

Dick.

I wish I had the upper hand. I could choke him out again. One time didn't teach him a lesson. But neither would the second one.

“So put me on the boat to the mainland,” I say carefully, testing him.

He cocks a brow in slight surprise.

That's right. He's curious now. He won't get rid of me until he finds out more about Tsariuk.

“Yeah?” he drawls. “What are you gonna do back home? Run around with rednecks?”

His eyes drop to my lips, then back up to my eyes, and fuck, if it doesn't stir me up.

I smile, holding his gaze, though it takes all my willpower not to drop it. “Maybe I'll keep working for Aleksei Tsariuk.”

His gaze goes cold. He leans over, his lips brushing my ear. “As a personal escort?”

His warm breath gives me goosebumps. He caves me in, not even touching me anywhere, yet crowding me with his lean muscled body. He smells like the ocean. His clothes are damp, which makes me wonder what went on at the port with Droga this morning. It also makes me wonder what it would be like to take his clothes off and take a shower with him.

“You are in my personal space,” I manage to say because I feel this might be going somewhere else, which is a bad idea right now. I could so fuck this man and let him do dirty things to me. But not until I make a deal.

“Last time I checked, you didn't mind,” he drawls, his nose brushing against my cheek as he moves his head to face me again.

Last time...

Only a day ago...

“I want to see you come, kitten.”

He is a taker. I knew it before I met him. He was born into wealth and power, but he is used to getting shit done on his own. It's rare and dangerous.

I am a taker, too. I grew up among men and was taught that women can be equal if they don't take shit from anyone.

This might be the only similarity between us. And that's a problem. Like predators, we won't share the same territory. Pity, really.

But I need him more than he needs me. I have to play nice. Or play myself down.

We stare at each other unblinkingly for the longest time, our warm breaths colliding in the inches between us. Until Archer pushes off the wall and takes a step back.

“So, Tsariuk,” he says, the heat in his eyes cooling, cutting me with disappointment at losing this heated moment.

“He’s looking for his daughter,” I say.

“Old news. She’s not here.”

“What if she is?”

He just stares like I insulted him.

When he doesn’t answer, I ask again. “What are the chances you missed her?”

“Close to zero,” he says with poison in his voice.

Arrogant bastard. All right. “Let me have access to your files, Archer.”

This might be the first time I call him by his name. It’s strange. It also sounds intimate, though there is nothing special in calling someone by their name. I kill any type of playfulness in my voice. It’s now or never.

“Let me look at everyone’s files, I say. “Those who came during Spring Break two years ago. The ones who were selected to come later. And your security. Let me get to know people. My father has a lot of connections to do a thorough background check.”

He snorts in amusement. “You kidding, right?”

“If Tsariuk hired one person to try to infiltrate your circles—me, that is—I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to infiltrate your security before.”

“I know that. Highly doubtful.”

“He might’ve done it right after the Change when the island wasn’t yet armed to a tee.”

Archer’s gaze hardens.

“How thoroughly did you go through your employees’ files?” I insist.

“Marlow deals with that.”

“Just background checks? Any ties to Russia?”

I know I am being too pushy. But Archer needs to know I am not just some wild girl who came here to play. Uncle and Dad did a lot of prep research. It’s not easy from the mainland. But they are pros, with experience in special ops and undercover.

I can help. I know I can. I will do my best to prove to my dad—and Archer Crone—that I can deliver.

Archer is quiet longer than expected—he knows his security has holes. The entire island is talking about it. A breach in surveillance a month ago is the proof. He is a brilliant man who is slipping slowly but steadily—the rumors are right—with all the booze and drugs and possibly something else that’s going on in his life that I don’t know about but will find out.

“Let me have access to your files,” I repeat and don’t care if it sounds like I’m begging. “If I find anything suspicious, I can contact my dad. He has connections in places you don’t. He knows people in the CIA. More importantly, he keeps in touch with Tsariuk.”

“Zion is secure and intruder-free.”

“Apparently not, considering people are being smuggled in and out of this place.”

I’m bluffing. But his eyes narrow just slightly—a second long enough for me to know that he is surprised.

He knows my background inside out but can’t detect my bluff.

“My best team was on it,” he says. “*Marlow* was on it. *I* was on it when Tsariuk contacted my dad a year ago. And I won’t give some wanna-be-spy the personal info of the richest families in the world.”

I exhale loudly and look away, shaking my head. “You always like this?” I meet his gaze again.

“Like what?” He blinks in annoyance.

Gorgeous and arrogant. “Think that you’ve got it. Everything and everyone.” I tilt my head, studying him as calmly as possible. I need a way in. “There’s always a margin of error. Things slip through the cracks. I have a fresh set of eyes, Archer. I don’t know any of the girls from Deene. I have a different perspective. I know Milena Tsariuk’s biography inside out. But I can start with your security personnel files and find out if there are any moles. Let me do this. I’ll work with Marlow if you want. Give me a month.” Shit, I might’ve cut myself short here. “Two. Three.” His brow ticks. “If I don’t find anything, I’ll leave this island with all your”—I roll my eyes on purpose—“non-disclosure agreements and go back to the mainland. You have nothing to lose.” Except me—wishful thinking.

“And if you find something?” His eyes narrow. He is interested. Good.

“Then you decide how to handle it with Tsariuk. It’s in your best interest to give him absolute proof his daughter is not here. Or is.”

His jaw moves. He is calculating. I got him thinking, and pride swells in me, though I'm holding my breath, waiting for his answer.

I have connections on the mainland who are *talking* to Tsariuk—that's the upper hand.

He cocks his head with that familiar smirk that I want to slap off his face. Next time it won't be a choking trick—I will for real hurt him if he doesn't stop this patronizing shit.

"How much did Tsariuk offer?" he asks.

I purse my lips, wondering how to handle the answer. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do." He takes a step closer. "You gonna keep playing games or you want a job?"

His gaze hardens again. Shit, I don't just *want* it—I *need* it if I want to move to the safe world.

"I don't care for money," he says. "I can pay double. But I am curious how much it's worth for your father to send his daughter who the hell knows where. Undercover. Considering you almost died in a boat crash on the way here."

I snort. "I wasn't even close."

"You always like this?" He mimics my question. "Think that you've got it?"

Touche.

He lets a smile out to play. And, damn, he can be charming.

His hands are back on the wall on each side of my head, caving me in again. His closeness disrupts my thoughts for a second. I would bang him in a heartbeat—the thought is really distracting.

"I'm waiting for the answer, Miss Ortiz."

His tone is sharp, almost playful, and I would like to play. Later.

"I don't know, really." There is momentary disappointment in his eyes. "But..." I say quickly, taking a deep breath. "If I were to find Milena Tsariuk, my family would have a chance to move to Australia. The money would buy visas and access past lockdown."

There it is. The burn in Archer's eyes chills a little.

"Australia..." he echoes, pushing off the wall. "I see. Dreaming big."

His tone pricks me like an icicle.

"Not everyone has all the money in the world to do what they want," I say more angrily than intended. "The safe world is off-limits to the regular

mortals.” I smirk. “To those who can’t afford to bribe their way in, that is. Some people take risks in order to live in a better place.”

“Chill,” he throws casually over his shoulder as he walks toward the bar. “You want breakfast?”

The change of topic is so sudden that I’m startled.

“What breakfast?” I blurt before I think. I’m starving.

“Cognac,” Archer says from the bar.

Eight in the freaking morning. Seriously? If he doesn’t stop day-drinking, it might get harder to have serious conversations with him.

“I don’t drink on the job,” I say. “When can I start?”

I am pushing. He needs a push. And adrenaline is already spiking in my blood.

He turns and stares at me as he takes a slow sip from his glass.

He is a savage, not me.

“Call guest services for food,” he says. “I’ll transfer you to a different place since you’ll be staying... a little while.” His lips curl in a smile, and my heart is about to burst with excitement.

“I am fine where I am.” The bungalow they put me up in the other day is actually one of the best places I’ve ever stayed.

“I’ll get Marlow to give you an employee phone, and I’ll call you when I’m ready to take you to the Center.”

“When?”

He chuckles. “Impatient, aren’t we? Soon.” He cocks an eyebrow. “Let yourself out.”

“Yes, boss,” I say, mimicking his guards. But as I walk toward the door, I realize that it sounded pathetic.

Shit.

“Kat.”

I turn around to see him lean on the couch, swinging the cognac in his glass. “I like that. Keep it up.”

I try not to blush.

I’m not blushing.

Not smirking.

No.

But my heart beats a dozen times a second.

I can fly right now.

I am staying. For now.

I have a job. For now.

I'm in, despite the fact that I got caught.

And I made a deal with the devil.

"It's Katura," I say, trying to sound cold. *Let's keep it professional. For now...* "Unless you are friends or family."

As I walk out and the door closes behind me, he says, "Sounds good, Kat."

Dick.

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ARCHER

WHEN KATURA LEAVES, I EXHALE IN RELIEF—LIKE WHEN YOU SEE A SPIDER crawl outside, and you close your window.

Except, she is on my island and will be for a while—I should be careful around her. I’ll put a tracker in her phone.

But I can’t help smiling—she just became a double spy. Tsariuk wants to be sneaky? I’ll play along.

I walk to my bedroom, shed my wet clothes, and step into the shower.

“Corlo, fifty-five degrees.”

Ironically, the AI assistant is the most loyal thing in my life. Everyone else is either a traitor, a deserter, or a spy.

The cold water soothes the pain from bruising. The cage fight the other night seems like an eternity ago and bat-shit crazy. I need to lay off the booze. The last several days after raiding the Eastside are a classic example of a psychotic breakdown.

I dry myself off, studying my body in the mirror.

My ribs feel better, though the bruises still look awful, including the one on my jaw. My nose is still swollen. There are dark circles under my eyes and a purple circle around my left one. I look like a fucking panda. A billion-dollar monstrosity.

A nap is what I need, and while putting on jeans and a plain t-shirt, I contemplate going into my office, leaving the phone outside, and locking the door. My villa office is a gray soundproof cubicle. At least there, I can close my eyes and not bother about the outside world.

Like a predator that senses everything, my phone rings.

Amir's name flashes on the screen.

He is the one person who can handle this island and Gen-Alpha if anything ever happens to me. He rarely calls. Never annoys me. The call will be brief, so I pick up.

"Archer." He is a man of few words. I wish he taught the art of speaking to all my employees.

"Amir," I answer calmly. "How is it going?"

He flew to the island after the Change. My father's connection, he is in his early thirties, with a degree in engineering and millions in his account. Quiet, serious, speaks three languages, including Arabic, which is a huge help, considering the Arabs are our main dealers in the Middle East and Asia. His father runs a security firm in the Emirates. A quarter of our security contractors come from there—something I am not so easy about.

"Everything is fine," Amir says. "I wouldn't bother you, but Mr. Kishida just called. He wants to have a virtual meeting with the rest of the board members at midnight. The time works for everyone's time zone."

It's common for us, the top tier, to work at night when we have important meetings or deals. Another thing that contributes to my insomnia.

I grit my teeth.

"You missed the previous three meetings, Archer. Naturally, they are concerned."

Concerned.

Gen-Alpha is on autopilot for now until we approve the new formula. What they are concerned about is the island and the Center, not me.

Before, I felt irreplaceable. Granted, I am the brain behind the formula and hold the major stakes in Gen-Alpha.

But now that the project has rolled out in more than half of the countries around the world, I feel less invested.

"I'll stop by in the afternoon," I say. "I'm bringing a new person in."

This means I need to sober the fuck up.

I've entertained the idea of resigning from the board for months. Never told Dad. He will throw a fit. But somehow, I give fewer and fewer fucks every day about the one thing that was my whole focus in the last years. A dream once upon a time.

A beep comes from my phone.

Speaking of the devil.

Marlow, who is in charge of Ayana security, should be sweating his ass off to fix the security issues.

Marlow: Dropped the three on the Eastside. Clothes, supplies, food. All good.

The Eastside should be grateful, now that the stupid standoff is over and their self-hailed king, Droga, is off to the mainland with his blondie.

Two years ago, when we got the news about the nuclear bombs, shit hit the fan. We were attacked by the Savages from town. Several spring-breakers were killed. When you see the dead bodies of the friends who only earlier that morning were partying on yachts and belonged to the richest families, life makes a 180-degree-turn. An argument with Bo, Ty, Droga and over a dozen others turned vicious and almost killed another person. They were banned to the Eastside to live like Robinsons Crusoe for two years.

Move on, right?

I make myself a drink, pop a painkiller, and slump on the couch.

The villa is quiet, and I close my eyes, enjoying the silence.

Yeah, it's hard to move on when you lose people who mean the world to you.

The guilt from the fire accident haunted me for years. I didn't mean to push Droga that night four years ago. What was stronger than guilt was the hurt from losing my best friend. I've never had a bond as strong with any other person. To be fair, not even my little bro before I lost him.

But life works in mysterious ways.

I lured Droga to Zion, saving his life. I brought Callie Mays, his favorite pussy, to this island. He got what he wanted all along, and now they are off to their happily ever after, however fucked it will be on the mainland.

And just like four years ago, I lost him again.

Yeah, move on.

But regret doesn't let go. I should be happy for him. Instead, he is just another person who left me.

Mom. Little Adam. Droga. My dad, who gives zero shits and is there but not really.

The memories of what we had and what we lost weigh down on me so heavily that I have an urge to down a drink and pop another pill to get my mood up. A shitty combo, from a chemistry perspective. That's what's ruining me lately.

I am a scientist. But this island drives me crazy. I promised Dad I would do this for another couple of years. Then I'll peace off to Australia. For the rest of my life. Or Chile. Sounds nice, though their economy is God-awful after North America got crippled.

People don't understand world logistics and how complex it is. One developed country crumbles, and the rest of the world sees the consequences. Everyone gloated that Russia's economy hit rock bottom before the Change. But guess what? They are used to poverty. They are tough. And guess who has major deposits of metals, grains, and food supplies that before and after the Change provided the rest of the world? You guessed it. Russia, the West's enemy, the mother that pulled its tit away, and now, after the Change, the West found out for themselves that rock bottom has a basement.

Not Zion.

Everyone should thank me. It's the land of plenty. Granted, it also has more investments and capital due to its residents' hefty bank accounts.

But it's like a fancy cake with an elaborate fake topping that stays good for a long time while the inside rots.

Zion is an island of pain decorated with fancy palm trees and picture-perfect villas. It saved many but also became the epicenter of all the grief and trauma from losing loved ones on the mainland. We thought it would go away with time, but it's only replaced with depression and hopelessness that no amount of money or partying can cover up.

Lately, my pain only gets dulled by booze and drugs and always gets worse when the high wears off.

So I put the fucked up combo on repeat, hoping to fall asleep and not wake up. This vicious cycle makes me crazy.

I take a sip of cognac.

There we go again.

I must be immune to alcohol. Constant drinking keeps me in an almost permanent state of being awake.

Fuck everyone.

There is no getting away from the feeling that since Droga and Callie left on a boat this morning, the island got emptier. The only thing that's keeping me afloat is my curiosity about Katura. She is refreshing, despite rubbing me the wrong way. She is the only human on this island who is not

carrying a dark shadow of the Change. The only one who looks into the future.

Australia.

I smirk.

I want to spend more time with her and pull her strings. She is a mystery. She does everything that a person should *not* be doing under someone else's authority—mine. She is like a kill switch in everything I do. A distraction. Sabotage.

But there was a glimpse of hope earlier.

Yes, boss.

That's right, kitten.

Soon, she'll be saying this as she gets down on her knees in front of me and unzips my jeans. God knows I need a distraction.

My phone rings.

Slate.

No one leaves me alone. Ever. Even for an hour. But if the head of my personal security calls, it must be important.

"Boss." His tone is confusing when I pick up. "We have your..." There is a momentary silence.

"Spit it out."

"The Eastsiders are coming back."

What?

Three Outcasts sabotaged Ayana's western security tower several days back, burning it to the ground as a distraction to help Droga sneak in. I fucking forgave them and sent them back to the Eastside this morning. The guards should've been back by now.

"What's their problem? Marlow just texted me that the boat left the Eastside." I am confused.

He clears his throat. "Not them, boss. I'm talking about the tattooed guy and his girl."

Droga...

My world takes a spin on its axel.

ARCHER

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?” I ASK AS CALMLY AS I CAN, THOUGH MY HEART slams in my chest so loudly that I think I’m about to pass out.

“The cargo boat turned around and just came back. That couple is talking to the port security guys, who won’t let them off the docks. They are requesting you.”

I feel like I am ready to jump off the couch, except I am rising slowly, not believing what I hear.

“Tell security to lay off and I’ll be there in twenty. And get two guys on ATVs to follow me to the port. Now!”

I search the villa for the radio, then run outside like I never ran before.

In a minute, my Street Fighter motorcycle is going faster than sound, swishing past the resort entrance security, north toward Port Mrei.

This time, my heart is hammering for a different reason.

I curse Droga with all words imaginable, but I am grinning into the wind as I zoom through the jungle down the road to Port Mrei.

Questions flicker in my mind one after another. Does he need something? Did something happen for the boat to turn around? He made it clear he and Callie didn’t want to stay.

I fly through the trashed streets of Port Mrei, people stopping and turning their heads. Most don’t know who I am, though everyone knows my name.

I slow down as I approach the port and disregard the port gate security guy who flags me down—*moron*—and is immediately jerked aside by another guard who apparently recognizes me.

My bike slows, pulling up to one of the docks, but my heart slams in my chest with such force that I think I might have a heart attack—the sight of Droga and Callie brings out all the guilt and anger and shame. Yeah, this morning was a disaster. I was at my lowest.

Droga stands with his hand on Callie's waist, and they both stare at me as I approach. Every step is like walking on ice, but my face is hot under the morning tropical sun.

Five port security guards stand around them like they are prisoners. I hear the ATV engines behind me—my security caught up. Crew members from other boats gawk like it's a spectacle.

The breeze is too hot.

The sun is too bright.

And suddenly, in the middle of the day, us facing each other with armed guards around feels like...

A manhunt.

Yeah, I get it now.

It's embarrassing. Semi-sober, I now understand how insane my actions in the previous days were.

And here is the fucking irony—for the first time in years, I try to arrange my face into the most serious yet approachable expression but don't know how to act.

I stop several feet away from Droga and Callie and look at *her*. She is his anchor—it took me a while to understand it. This girl shot me this morning, desperate to protect him, and if it wasn't for a miracle, I could've been dead.

There is still hostility in her gaze, but she is not afraid. Callie Mays is different, and I'm starting to respect her.

I shift my eyes to Droga, and his gaze rips my heart into fucking pieces.

"What's happening?" I ask, trying to sound calm and cold.

There is a little smirk in the corner of his lips when he says, "Is your offer still valid?"

And fuck if my heart doesn't do a cartwheel.

They want to stay?

It takes all my willpower not to show disbelief.

"Sure," I hear myself say.

He turns to Callie. "We want to stay, on the Eastside," she says.

So she is the speaker now—fine.

I turn to make sure Slate brought enough ATVs with him, then turn back to Droga.

“You can take an ATV to Ayana. I’ll tell the guys to take you by boat to the Eastside. Or you can take an ATV across the Divide so you have one just in case.”

I know I feel much more anxious right now than them. They didn’t give in by coming back. This feels like it’s forgiveness from Droga. Or so I hope.

“Crone,” Droga says, and this time, my name coming out of his mouth is not spiteful for a change. “Ty and the other two guys you kept in holding cells—”

“They are back on the Eastside,” I cut in.

You wanted mercy? Here it is, Droga.

I try not to smirk in triumph.

“There is another issue. Bo.”

I nod. “He’s at the Ayana hospital. Stable.”

There’s confusion in Droga’s eyes.

“Since when?” he asks quieter.

“Since the morning after the shooting.”

And it feels like fucking victory. I have to make an effort to hold back a grin.

Yeah, I am not quite the villain you thought I was.

Callie’s lips twitch in a smile as she looks down.

Droga rakes his fingers through his hair. “Can we see him?”

“Sure. Follow me to Ayana. I’ll take you to the hospital ward. Maddy is with him.”

I don’t look but know they just choked in surprise—two Outcasts at Ayana.

And just like that, I have them back, and my stupid treacherous heart is dancing a happy dance.

I am hungover and should be depressed. The booze always brings me the lowest, hence the uppers I take. But instead, I feel liberated as I ride back to the resort, Droga and Callie right behind me on an ATV.

It feels like the world around me as I know falls apart into pieces and right away transforms into something new. It took years for this to happen. Maybe I can change things on this island. One person at a time. Droga. The

Outcasts on the Eastside. This mess with Tsariuk that I need to sort out, and with it, reevaluate Zion security and surveillance.

At Ayana, I wait outside while Droga and Callie make their way through the doors of the hospital ward. Slate gets instructions about escorting them to the Eastside. And when Droga and Callie come out half an hour later, they seem more cheerful.

I lean on my bike, studying them as they approach. This is weird, considering the events of the previous several days—the bruises that mark our faces a reminder.

But I am sober. Already or still.

“Here.” I give Droga a new phone. “The Ayana directory is there. Marlow’s numbers. Mine. When Maddy gets hers, she’ll call you.”

I can’t help staring at his tattooed knuckles as he takes the phone from my hand.

“Are you gonna harass me long-distance?” Droga asks.

I shoot a surprised look at him, but my unease dissipates when I see his half-smile.

“In case of emergency,” I say and cut my gaze away. “Bo. Savages. Weather. Whatever.”

Slate comes on the radio on my belt. “Entrance 24. Whenever they are ready, boss.”

“They’ll meet you there in five.”

“Instructions on restraints? Weapons?”

Droga’s lips stretch in a mocking smile at the words.

“No,” I blurt into the radio.

“One more thing,” Droga’s voice stops me. He hesitates. “There’s a warehouse by the port. One of many. The homeless live behind them.” He looks around as if searching for words. “There’s a kid, about ten years old, who lives there. Sonny Little. You think you can locate him and let me know? I’ll come get him.”

A kid?

Is Droga losing his mind or there’s more on this island that I don’t know about?

“I’ll find him,” I throw out casually, get on the bike, and rev up the motor.

“Crone!”

Droga is serious as fuck—I know that look—when he says, “Thank you.”

And I feel that maybe—just maybe—life is not so bad after all.

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KAT

I SPENT THE LAST TWO DAYS WALKING THE AYANA RESORT, TRYING TO learn every corner of it. It's the fanciest place I've ever been around the world. My new home for some time. My workplace—the thought makes me smile, though it's unusual to feel dependent on someone. And right now, I am completely under Archer's control.

I really can't do much while I wait for his instructions.

No phone yet, no change of clothes. Ugh. I'm like an unwanted guest.

Eventually, my patience runs low, so I pick up the house-guest phone and dial the guest services.

"Connect me to Nick Marlow, the head of security. Tell him it's the new arrival."

In a moment, Marlow barks, "Yeah?"

"Dude, I need a phone, I need to—"

"Droga and Callie came back."

"What?" I almost choke on my words.

"They turned around and came back to the island. I'll see you in a few."

He hangs up, and I pace around the bungalow for another twenty minutes until he shows up.

With his blue eyes, a man bun, and his gorgeous body, he would've looked killer in a slick suit. But the richest guys who reside on this island don't bother with fashion much. He is wearing a plain t-shirt and jeans, managing to look hot as hell, the tiger tattoo on his arm the most elaborate decoration.

If only I were into nice guys. But no, my eyes are set on the asshole who just so happens to be my boss as of today.

“Spill,” I tell him.

Marlow flings himself onto the couch and rubs his face with both hands.

“This morning, Archer let Kai and Callie go on the boat to the mainland.” I know that—the news already raised my eyebrows more than once. “But they turned around and came back. And they are on their way to the Eastside.”

I’ll be damned. Did they lose their brains in the ocean?

“They decided to stay on the Eastside like survivalists?” I smirk, crossing my arms at my chest and leaning against the wall. “So, there will be more soap opera drama?”

“Hopefully not. Apparently, it’s a truce.”

“Archer knows such a thing?”

To be fair, that’s what I have with him after he blew my cover. But his war with Kai Droga dates back to before the Change. And it got resolved this morning—Zion is just full of surprises, if not miracles.

“Yeah,” Marlow says and grins.

“Oh, I see. You are happy as a puppy because now you can visit your buddy, Ty, and others without sneaking behind Archer’s back.”

He blows out a long breath and rubs his face. “Kat, you have no idea what the last two years were like.”

Somehow, in just several days, Marlow has become my closest friend on Zion. He is so easy to get along with. Good-hearted. Fun. I’ll get him to show me around Ayana maybe as soon as tonight. I always get along better with guys. There’s no silly drama with them or rivalry or jealousy. And the fact that we can shoot the shit in Russian is a plus.

“So this is the first gadget,” he says, digging into his pocket and tossing a cellphone to me that I catch and stare at like a kid who got a Christmas present.

I haven’t touched a cellphone since I left the mainland. Zion uses the StingRay-type technology to create its own network using the local cell tower. The phone is on, and I open the phonebook, grinning like a fool.

“It has the main directory,” Marlow explains. “Guest services, the Center directory, Lab, Surveillance, all the restaurants, medical staff. Port Mrei’s directory should you need something there, though I hope you don’t. Plus Archer’s number, mine, and Droga’s.”

My eyes snap at him in surprise.

“Kai got a phone? Since when?”

“Since an hour ago.” Marlow wiggles his brows.

“Can I call the mainland?”

Marlow shakes his head with a snort. “That’s a no. Until you get clearance from Archer.”

I see.

“Also, there is no camera. Only spring-breakers and those who have clearance have those.”

“Bummer.”

“They will take you to HR later and get your Ayana account set up. Also, if you want to change the bungalow to a bigger one in the main part of the resort—”

“I’m fine here,” I cut him off. “I won’t be staying that long.”

“Right. You have an assignment.”

I look at Marlow from under my eyebrows.

He narrows his eyes at me. “Yes, Archer filled me in. No one else knows. For now, you are a new secretary.”

“Yeah... I’ll be a secretary alright.”

He chuckles through his nose. “I knew you were up to something. But working for the Russian mafia, really? You are a Bratva spy now?”

There is admiration in his eyes, making me stand tall. I just need to prove that I can do a better job than his Human Resources staff.

“What’s with the street slang? Tsariuk is not a thug.” I correct him. “Technically, he is an oligarch.”

“I know. Still impressive.”

Just then my phone beeps, the smile on my face growing at the sound and the notification on the screen.

Archer Crone: Miss Ortiz, be ready in ten.

Miss Ortiz, huh?

Apparently, I should always be ready for the Big Boss regardless where I am.

“Anything exciting?” Marlow shows a sneaky smile when I raise my eyes at him.

“The Big Boss himself is taking me to work.”

“Uh-huh. Where would that be?”

I try to make my glare at Marlow as sharp as possible. “Don’t.”

He grins, then turns away. “I warned you before.”

Ne igrati s ognjom.

That’s what Marlow told me at the cage fight days ago—don’t play with fire.

Marlow is no fool. He’s noticed my interactions with Archer. But he’s wrong about one thing.

Archer’ is cold as ice. He isn’t fire.

I am.

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KAT

ZION CAN ROUGHLY BE DIVIDED INTO FOUR PARTS.

The Eastside is where the Outcasts reside, the two dozen who were cast out to live on a self-sustainable resort aka The Village. To be fair, I loved my several weeks there. It reminded me of Pennsylvania, when my father took me to the Appalachian trail for a week, with just the clothes on our backs.

“You gonna learn how to survive, kid,” he said.

And for a week, we made fire from nothing, not even a match—yeah, dig that—made shelter, caught fish, ate berries, insects, and whatever small game we could find. Those were the weirdest most miserable days in my life. But, I gotta admit, I came out of those mountains feeling like Rambo. You drop me in the middle of nowhere in the jungle, and I’ll make it work, baby. Zion is a piece of cake.

Then there is Ayana on the Westside, the luxury resort that stretches several miles north to south and has everything your heart desires from international cuisine to yachts, game rooms, and spas.

Up north are the locals. There is Port Mrei, the local tourist town that is slowly turning into a dump.

And next to it, just a little southeast, toward the cliffs and the Devil’s Caverns, is the Ashlands—the slums, the land of the homeless and the Savages.

Marlow left, and I stand on the front terrace of my bungalow, studying the surrounding thick patch of trees and bushes and listening to the party noises coming from the nearby bungalow.

In a little while, I will finally get to see the most important part of this island—the lab, data and surveillance rooms, collectively called the Center.

I hear the sports bike before I see it, my heart pumping in anticipation when Archer pulls up next to the front porch.

It's the hottest bike I've seen. And the guy riding it? Well...

He's changed, now wearing a black t-shirt, jeans, and black sneakers. He smells like expensive cologne and body wash. His bruises are the only thing that gives away the mess of the last days. Sunglasses disguise his eyes.

The muscles on his arms are defined as he leans over, holding the handlebars like the bike is his extension. A billionaire on a sports bike—I'll have to do a lot of self-care after work to keep myself from humping this guy.

He perches his sunglasses on his head and eyes my outfit like he expects to see something different.

I've worn the Ayana tank and shorts for several days now. That's all I have since they dragged us here from the Eastside. Archer's stare is always less than subtle, making me uncomfortable and turned on at the same time.

"Is that how the richest man on this island dresses for work?" I ask him as I approach.

His bike is slick—the most gorgeous dark-gray sports beast. Gray must be Archer's favorite color—his clothes, his house interior. Maybe, to match his soul.

"Did you expect a Brioni suit?" He smirks. "Clothes are not what makes me the king of this place."

"What does?"

"If you get lucky, you'll find out." The smug bastard motions behind him. "Hop on."

We don't ride through the main Ayana road—we fly. The fact that I feel proud sitting on the back of Archer's motorcycle is an embarrassing admittance that this guy is going to blow my mind away. I just know it. He already did. Does. And will continue if I don't stay away. Which I don't intend to.

My thoughts should definitely have brakes, but they fail around him. *Hello, rabbit hole.*

The ride—or flight—is only five minutes. We reach the most eastern part of Ayana, not far from Cliff Villa, and go through a security gate that's

hidden in the thick jungle.

I wasn't even aware of the road there. But another two minutes through the thick jungle, and we reach a clearing with two huge rectangular buildings that don't have windows and a tall tower with multiple satellites above it like antlers. The structure looks like a nuclear shelter, surrounded by meticulously trimmed lawns, gazebos, and an enclosed walkway between them. Scooters, electric boards, and golf carts are parked neatly in rows on each side of the building, and we halt at the entrance to one of them.

The Center looks much smaller on the outside because when Archer swipes the key and we walk into one of the buildings, it's a level lower than the ground and huge.

We halt at the entrance, not going farther down the massive steps that sprawl into a wide area that looks like a convention center.

"Wow. Yeah... I mean..."

I have no words. This place was meant to be what—hurricane-proof? Nuclear-proof? The ceiling is much higher than what the outside gives away because the place is partially built into the ground.

One side is closed off by tall walls—data rooms. The other side behind the glass or plastic windows is a giant space with dozens of monitors and people—the surveillance center.

"Shit," I exhale.

I underestimated this place and Archer's control. But the most shocking is not the scale but that the people in front of the monitors are for the most part not spring-breakers but adults, some of them much older, many faces different from those of regular civilians—I know, I spent the last seven years in the military circles.

Archer motions to a tall Hulk-looking man in tactical pants, a t-shirt, and a duty belt, in his forties. He could intimidate God if it came to it.

"Slate, this is Miss Katura Ortiz," Archer introduces us.

There's a star-and-wings tattoo on the inside of his forearm.

"Air Force?" I smile and stretch out my hand, which the guy studies with slight surprise for a brief second before shaking it. "Yes, ma'am."

Archer swipes a curious glance at me. "Miss Ortiz is with us for a short while. And working closely with me." He punctuates *closely*. "Slate is my personal security. His number is in your phone. Should you need help."

"Will I?" I cock a brow.

“Next building.” Archer blinks away and leads me out.

The lab center is about the same size, though I don’t see the actual lab part of it, because we walk into the office section, with dozens of desks and people.

A Barbie with pink hair over her shoulder and long legs below the too-short blue strap dress, clacks on her high heels toward us.

She casts a condescending glance down my Ayana outfit. “Archer, Amir just got off the phone with Mr. Kishida. He wants to talk to you.”

“Margot, this is Katura,” Archer introduces us.

“Service staff?”

Bitch.

Archer smiles.

Fucker.

“Actually, she is working here for a short while.”

The Pink Medusa arches a brow in my direction. “Doing what exactly?”

“Research. She’ll take that front desk.”

It’s right where every single person can see me. And...

“That’s my office.” Archer nods toward the floor-to-ceiling glass windows only twenty feet from it, which hides a small office.

“What research would that be?” The Pink Medusa’s hand is on her hip like I interrupted her day. Her hair is an expensive shade of pink, no roots visible, like she was born this way, with designer clothes and manicured nails. Another product of a fat bank account.

“She’s gonna look into the security employee files,” Archer explains.

“Her?” She drops another glance at my outfit. “Right after a Mud Run?”

She’s gonna drown, I swear—in a toilet bowl—if she continues in this manner.

Archer motions again to someone, and a girl with a dark-pixie haircut and a summer suit comes over. One of his assistants, I assume.

“April, help Miss Ortiz get situated. Show her what’s where. She’s not working today, but get HR to get her settled with an Ayana account. I talked to them already.”

When?

I catch the Pink Medusa studying me with suspicion and arch a brow at her.

“Later,” Archer says.

The Pink Medusa rolls her eyes as she turns to follow him into his office.

I don't yet know if she is screwing him, but I can tell she's gonna be a nightmare.

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ARCHER

THE NEXT DAY, I GET TO MY OFFICE AT NINE O'CLOCK, WHICH IS TOO EARLY for me, considering we had a virtual meeting with the board members at midnight.

The biggest accomplishment from yesterday is not the new seven-figure account we signed with the Japanese but a full meal that I ate for the first time in days and four hours of sleep afterward.

The bruising on my face is fading. My head still feels heavy, but I didn't have my morning cognac—tough life, but I need to control my temper and have another virtual meeting later. It's like the whole world is trying to keep me off booze.

For the last week, I've been working from the office in my villa. But I have a new addition to my crew, and the possibility of a little entertainment on this otherwise boring island drags me to the office early.

Kat is wearing shorts and a long-sleeve shirt from the Ayana general store, her hair gathered in a high pony tail.

April gave her a resident's bracelet yesterday and helped her order clothes from the mainland. I wonder what her style is. Unlike the rich girls on Ayana, Katura is a street kid raised by a single military dad. Maybe that's why I picked her to come here—some strange sixth sense.

I nod to her when I walk past her desk to my office and tell Corlo to open the blinds.

Usually, they are closed. Usually, I don't want to see anyone around. But the view through the glass brings a smile to my face. The beautiful spy

is on full display. I can see what she does, who she looks at, and when she takes breaks.

She wanted to work for me? I'll have a magnifying glass over her.

She has an app activated on her phone that lets me track her at any given moment. Not that I think she will screw around—there is too much at stake for her, and she knows it.

I trapped her. I'll study her. And if she finds any useful info—I'll get her and her dad those precious visas to Australia and maybe make a beneficial deal with Tsariuk.

I pick up the phone to call Marlow. "I need a file on Katura Ortiz, her dad and uncle, full background check on the latter two."

I need to go through her info again as well as her family's.

There are over a hundred security employee folders on Kat's desk. There is no security breach about this. Spring-breakers' info is a whole different story. She is crazy to assume I will give her access to those.

I lean back in my chair and cock my head, watching her.

As if sensing it, Kat raises her eyes from her desk and locks her gaze with mine for just a moment. Something in that gaze makes every cell in my body come alive.

Until Margot walks in.

No knocking.

Her pink hair is curled and carefully placed over her right shoulder, a baby-blue dress and high heels that will clack against the floor toward my desk in a second, and she will plant her ass on the edge of it, her finger curling a pink strand.

I know Margot's every step before she even thinks of it. She's been playing this game for two years. She wants me. And it's getting old.

Pretty—don't get me wrong. I would've fucked her in a heartbeat if...

One, we weren't locked up on this island and didn't have to see each other daily afterward.

Two, she is too valuable of an asset. Margot doesn't understand that. She was born with a brilliant brain, but her fucked up mogul family brainwashed her into thinking that science is silly, and her looks are all that matters to have a spectacular life.

Yep.

Just like I knew, Margot's ass is on my desk, one leg dangling off.

"You got a new view," she drawls, staring through the glass at Kat.

“For a change, yes.” I nod slowly.

Her lips press tightly together, and the way her eyes roll is too deliberate like she is shaming me.

She is jealous. Precious. Her words drip with sarcasm when she says, “I take it you will spend more time in this office from now on?”

“I have a lot to catch up on.”

Margot won’t let it go. “Oh, working hard?”

“I always work hard.”

“Not in the last few weeks.”

“I needed a break from this place. Worked from home. Stop with the jealousy, Margot.”

“Pff.” She exhales through her lips and fakes a laugh. “I’m just cautious. What’s so special about her that you let her stick her nose in the employee files? Is there no security protocol now?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

But she does. She thinks everything I do is her business.

After the Change, a handful of spring-breakers went back to the mainland. As per the congressman’s request, my dad, who flew in right after the attacks, took Anna Reich, the congressman’s daughter and my then girlfriend, back home, which made me officially single.

But Margot threw a fit when her dad sent a helicopter to pick her up. He had connections in Australia where she could’ve lived happily ever after.

But she didn’t leave.

I didn’t say a word and raised an eyebrow when she said she’d stay on Zion and work for Gen-Alpha. I mean, the girl didn’t have to work a day in her life. She had a string of rich beaus in different parts of the world, if they were still alive that is, but chose to stay here.

So yeah, my respect to Margot for her decision. But mostly to her brilliant brain that she seems to use only in the data center. When she is around me, she starts this sophisticated mating ritual that gets on my nerves.

Kat can’t compare in upbringing or financial background, but her confidence can be intimidating to others. Margot is worried. It’s in the way she swings her foot repeatedly and her finger curls one of the pink strands too vigorously.

One of my assistants calls. “Anything you need, Mr. Crone?”

Like everybody else, she’s surprised to finally see me in the office.

“Yes, a coffee.”

Haven't had one in weeks. Usually, it's booze, and I'm itching for a drink. Addiction is a burden, Pavlov's reflex on a chemical level, and I need to break it.

"And tell the new girl about the meditation rooms," I say just to mess with Margot.

"Already did, sir."

"Tell her there is a printing room and an employee break room in the data center next door."

"She knows. She spent an hour there this morning. The team knows her."

Margot's lips curl in a smirk at the same time as I raise my eyebrows.

"A quick one, huh?" Margot pushes off the desk and sashays toward the door. "Will she be *working* in your office soon?" She snorts as she turns to throw me an angry look.

"You know my rules." I don't sleep with employees.

I stare at her as she leaves, and my eyes shift to Kat at her desk, who raises her eyes to follow Margot for several seconds then shifts her gaze to me.

Goddam, those eyes...

She purses her lips with intentional exaggeration like she knows my secrets and slowly blinks down.

Somehow, I feel like I am going to break my rules very soon.

KAT

THE NUMBER OF FILES ON MY DESK IS OVERWHELMING. BUT THAT'S THE least overwhelming thing in the last two days.

The biggest confidence-fuck is Archer's gaze on me through the glass window of his office. I can feel it on my skin. It's curious and challenging like he waits for me to fail.

Whatever, prick.

Yesterday, I spent two hours with Brooke from HR, who gave me a thin waterproof silicone bracelet to wear on my wrist.

"It has a chip with all your info and balance," she explained.

"Balance?"

"Yes, your account with Ayana."

I came to Zion with nothing, so that's a surprise.

"You can use it anywhere in Ayana to purchase things—restaurants, bars, gym, spa, Ayana general store, where you can get all the essentials. It works as a key to the Center as well as to your condo. Shopping outside Zion goes through a different app, and I already set up your account."

The longer she chirped away, the higher my eyebrows rose until they were almost at my hairline.

"Who sets up the balance? I mean, I'm new."

"All the newcomers get a general setup that's connected to their payroll account. But yours is directly under Mr. Crone's as per his instructions."

Mind blown.

I got a laptop, and excitement surged through me with the possibilities until Brooke said, "The connection to the internet is through the local

server.” *Of course.* “You have limited access until Mr. Crone gives clearance for using IM applications, messengers, and video apps.” *Ugh, no surprise here.* “The server blocks out cookies and spyware, so the use of the internet is limited for security reasons, you understand. If there is something specific you need access to, you’ll have to go through the Center and get clearance from the management.”

Clever.

And then there was shopping. Which, to be fair, I hadn’t done online since the Change. But this place has a corporate account with Thrive, the online shopping monopoly that took over the market since the Change.

No prices but an online concierge who in a matter of one hour helped to arrange an entire wardrobe for me.

Brooke only smiled sweetly. “The first shipment won’t get here until two days from now, I am afraid. Sorry for the inconvenience. But the expedited service to Zion would cost more than your wardrobe.” She laughed and then apologized again.

You kidding me?

I left the HR office in shock, the silicone thread with a chip on my wrist burning me with the constant reminder that I am now in a different world that seems too unreal.

The shock didn’t go away for the rest of the day. Not when I picked up the tablet on the desk at my bungalow and, scanning my new bracelet, ordered takeout from one of Ayana’s restaurants. Then I spent three hours on the computer, figuring out how much access I had to the outside world.

And then I slept.

This morning, I got to the Center at seven and giggled like a kid when the scanner at the front entrance flashed green when I waved my bracelet.

April from HR told me about the files waiting on my desk. But I asked her to introduce me to some of the surveillance team on the morning shift.

It’s only a matter of time before I know everyone.

Now, I organize the files on my desk. It will take me longer than I thought to go through them. And those are not spring-breakers, which is another agenda, because after all, Milena Tsariuk might be one of them, and that’s my priority.

I feel too self-aware. I raise my eyes and see Archer in his office on the phone behind his desk, talking and... staring at me.

Ugh. I wonder if I should ask for a more secluded place to work. I could work from my bungalow, but the internet access is limited. So if I need any info or access to DMV and public records, I'll have to be here, in the Center.

Suck it up, I tell myself. And when I raise my eyes next time, Archer is not in his office.

I exhale in relief and work for hours, losing track of time, when the cellphone on my desk beeps, jolting me in surprise.

Marlow?

Besides Callie and Maddy, he is pretty much the only person who can possibly contact me.

But the beep on my phone is a text from Archer.

The fact that he is my boss still feels weird, but there is no way around it.

Archer: Are you good with Italian food?

I catch myself holding my breath.

Me: Sure.

In twenty minutes, Archer is back in his office, and one of his assistants, a short brunette in her twenties, arranges the take-out containers on his desk as I get another text.

Archer: My office.

"You don't go out with your friends and employees for lunch?" I ask as I step into his office and the assistant motions to the chair across the desk from Archer.

"I don't go out. No." He picks up a plate and puts a modest piece of chicken marinara on it, then motions toward my plate. "Help yourself."

He looks different today. Better. The swelling from his bruises is down, and his black eye has faded to yellowish, which makes him look normal again. To be precise—like the perfect Greek God that he is, one strand of his tousled dark hair falling down on his face.

God, do I want to play with it.

His v-neck long-sleeved shirt shows off part of his chest and the Cuban links. I wonder what he looks like in a suit, but I'm glad he dresses casually, which makes him approachable.

I'd love to just sit and drool over the sight of him. But even throwing occasional glances is sketchy as he seems to be constantly studying me.

I load up my plate with food and take a seat. “So the rumors are wrong?”

“Which ones?”

“That you don’t eat anything but cognac.”

Silence follows, and I raise my eyes to meet Archer’s cold ones.

“That depends on the date,” he says, a corner of his lips hitching in a smile.

“Out of line,” I blurt. “Sorry.”

Shit. Right. We are not friends. This is work.

To prove my point, Archer asks, “How’s work going?” as he cuts a small piece of his chicken and, not taking his eyes off me, puts it in his mouth.

Seeing this gorgeous guy eat is another thing that makes him more approachable.

“It’s been half a day. I’m getting to it,” I say, trying to sound confident.

The truth is, I’m not sure what I’m looking for yet.

I explain to Archer that I will separate the files of the security employees with any Eastern-European ties.

“It’s common sense.” I shrug as I eat penne pasta in the most amazing sauce I’ve ever had. “And I doubt that Tsariuk is that obvious, but it’s a start.”

Archer nods.

“I’ll go through employees’ family history and service records,” I continue. “If that’s okay, and I find something interesting, I would like to have access to the internet that has a wider range. My Dad has an access to a much bigger database, so...”

Archer’s lips curl in a smile as he takes another piece in his perfect mouth and chews slowly.

“Are you gonna stop staring me down at some point?” I ask when he doesn’t answer.

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“At work, yes.” I hold his gaze as his smile widens just a bit.

He explains the different companies that send contractors to Zion. “Marlow can give you more info. Some of it, at least.”

By the time we finish the conversation, my plate is clean. His still has more than half of the chicken fillet, and he catches me looking at it, but I don’t say anything.

The same girl comes and cleans the table as I am about to leave.

“Not so fast,” Archer stops me, then sets something up on his computer, gets up, and motions to his seat. “When you are ready, just press the call button.”

He leaves, and when I walk around the desk to his seat, suspicion nibbling at me, my heart jolts in excitement.

My dad’s name is in the corner of the screen.

Slowly, I take a seat on the edge of the office chair and press the call button.

I haven’t talked to Dad since I used my satellite phone on the Eastside, which is still there. And when the ring button drops and my father’s face fills the screen, the sight almost brings me to tears.

“Dad...” I say in a whisper, my heart ready to burst out of my chest.

“Hey, Kit-Kat.” He smiles.

Emotions surge through me like a storm—a messy combo of happiness and nostalgia and guilt.

His eyes search the screen, trying to figure out where I am. I wish this was just an ordinary conversation.

“They know,” I say, knowing that I should tell him the way things are. “*He* knows.”

Dad freezes. “How are you, sweetie?” he says instead. It’s his undercover habit to say as little as possible when wary of the surroundings.

I nod. “Good.” Embarrassment suddenly washes over me because I failed the only assignment ever given to me. “Archer Crone knows,” I repeat, wondering if this conversation is recorded.

“So... How is everything?” Dad is in permanent undercover mode.

“We made a deal,” I say.

“A deal?”

I explain briefly what I signed up for. Dad only nods, no emotion in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly, knowing that I screwed up before I even started, though I sure as hell will try to fix it. “Plan B, right?” I smile. It’s my dad’s training.

He smiles back. “Kit-Kat, it’s alright. As long as you’re safe. You *are* safe, right?”

I nod. I ask about Uncle and how things are at home, not taking my eyes off my dad, the face so dear to me that only now do I realize how much I

missed him.

The soft sound of the door opening makes me look up.

Archer is in the doorway, and my heart skips a beat. I think of cutting the call but don't, frozen to my spot.

So is Dad, knowing someone else is in the room.

Archer walks around the desk, then leans with his hand on my chair and bends to look at the screen.

"Mr. Ortiz." He nods, all business-like. "I am Archer Crone. Nice to meet you."

The world around me goes quiet as my heart starts thudding in my chest.

My face burns.

My mind is a clusterfuck.

And the lump in my throat won't go away as I stare at my dad on the screen.

He leans back in his chair. This is awkward and all my fault.

"Mr. Crone." The fact that my father addresses Archer, who is only in his early twenties, so professionally is bewildering. "I've heard a lot about you."

I can hear a smile in Archer's voice when he says, "I bet."

I am afraid to move or say anything when Archer does it instead of me. "Your daughter can talk to you any time she wants. But right now, I would like to have a word with you in private, please."

Dick.

I want to protest. When Dad nods, I want to scream, because he is *my* dad, I haven't seen him in weeks, and if Archer wants to talk to him, he can do so in front of me.

"Miss Ortiz?" Archer's cunning smile shines down on me when I look up.

Bitch.

I'll poke his eyes out one day.

"Please." He motions politely toward the door, and I have no choice but to walk out of the room as calmly as I can, though I wish I had a Molotov cocktail to toss behind me.

ARCHER

I LOVE MAKING THE WILD THING MAD. JUST A GLANCE IN HER DIRECTION AS she takes a seat at her desk outside my office, and I have to hold back laughter, seeing her brood. She smoothes her hair with her palm—a calming gesture I’ve never seen her do, but then I don’t think she’s been that angry until now.

Good.

I sit down in the chair and face the screen.

“Mr. Ortiz. I’d like to discuss our business with Aleksei Tsariuk.”

This is *our* business now. There is no way out of it for him. I am not one to beat around the bush. And definitely not when my island’s safety depends on it. He understands that as well as the fact that his daughter’s safety is in my hands now.

I don’t know why I expected Alex Ortiz to look much older. He is only in his early forties, with close-cut hair, broad shoulders, and several-day stubble. Former Navy SEAL. Former special ops. Former Thailand Counter Trafficking Unit. His background is more impressive than that of most men in my security.

He doesn’t flinch when I bring up Aleksei Tsariuk. Doesn’t wince when I tell him exactly what Kat told me. I see how he received the Distinguished Intelligence Medal for undercover work—nothing gives away his emotions. That’s where Kat gets it from, as well as her skin tone, full lips, and dark wavy hair.

“It’s in both our interests to work closely together,” I finish my short speech. “I can offer the same if not a larger compensation than Aleksei

Tsariuk. It's in my interest to find out if his daughter is here. More importantly—considering he expanded his search—find out if there're any moles in my security team. Obviously, you will keep your contract with Tsariuk—that will work to both our benefits. But I want to offer you a job in my team or at least request some help, considering your connections.”

The guy doesn't blink. I feel like I'm talking to a wall.

“Your daughter got a job. Even after I found out why she came to Zion. I have my own interest in that, you understand, and I want you on my side. But if she gets more intel than I would like her to have, she might stay on Zion long-term.”

I smile politely. He doesn't. It sounds like blackmail.

He needs to say something. Moreover, he needs to understand that I'm not dangerous like Tsariuk. I'm a businessman.

“I don't pick sides, Mr. Crone,” he finally says without a single muscle moving on his face. “I pick jobs.”

“And it got a little complicated, didn't it?” I don't smile now, tension burning the screen as both of us keep silent for some time. “I am simply offering you another one. I'd very much like you to consider it.”

I raise my eyes to look at Kat outside my office, making sure Mr. Ortiz understands the importance of his decision.

Truth is, this man's background is more impressive than any guy in my security. He would be an asset to my team.

We schedule another call for tomorrow. I need more info on this guy. Kat might be too young and careless, but her father is a professional, and I need more leverage.

When I finally walk out of the office and toward her desk, she tears her eyes off the files and leans back in her seat, arms crossed at her chest, which gives away her tension but also pushes her full breasts up, creating a deeper cleavage. She doesn't wear makeup, but her scorching eyes framed with long black lashes are mesmerizing.

“What did you have to say to my father?”

“We talked about work.”

“Well?” escapes her pretty lips, and I gloat at the fact that I'm slowly wrapping her family around my finger. Hopefully, her pretty lips soon will be wrapped around something else.

I drop my eyes to the files on her desk. “I should be asking *you* that. I hope your report tomorrow at lunch is more impressive than today.”

Anger flashes in her eyes, her lips parting to say something. But she changes her mind. “At lunch? Is that gonna be a regular thing?”

I wonder if that feistiness is the same in bed. Is she wild? Does she like it rough? Quick? Hard? Kinky?

“Reports? Yes. Lunches? We’ll see. I’m taking a personal interest in your work.”

“Uh-huh. Taking me under your wing?”

Her every word sounds like an invitation to her bed. Maybe, it’s wishful thinking. But a particularly dirty scenario goes through my mind.

“I have a better word than ‘wing’ in mind. See you tomorrow.”

I leave before I get a full hard-on.

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ARCHER

I SPEND SEVERAL DAYS TRYING TO CATCH UP ON WORK. IT KEEPS MY MIND off booze, at least until evening.

Most importantly, it helps not to think about Kat. Her working right outside my office was my idea, and I start thinking it wasn't a smart one. Considering I've been sex-deprived lately.

I jerk off every night, mostly thinking about her. That's an achievement—I'm back on track—since the boozing in the last month slowed down my appetite for many things, including sex.

Since Kat started working for me, we pretend like our little ride during the escort party two weeks ago didn't happen. To be exact, the wild thing was riding my hand, and I was left with blue balls afterward.

For now, we keep it civil. Though I can tell she would be down for much more.

She's gotten new clothes. Thanked me for that. I could've gotten her a couture collection if she asked and was willing to work for it. Though I have a feeling she is not the type to ask for things.

Kat dresses simply. Tight tanks that beautifully outline her torso and tits. Baggy cargo pants, her favorite, that hide her ass and beautiful legs. Laced tractor boots. She looks like she is ready for combat but would fit at a party if needed.

Her lush dark wavy hair is always braided halfway through her scalp, then either cascades lovely down her back, or is high on her head in a ponytail, or is tied in a bow tie at the back.

No makeup. She looks gorgeous without it—her thick black lashes fanning over her dark eyes. Her full lips are to die for, and I'm not talking about kissing. Or that too.

It's afternoon, and I get to my villa to grab a quick lunch, then continue to my villa office. The Center is a senses-overload after working from home for weeks. The office in my villa is a perfect fortress of solitude.

But I'm restless. The only problem with being at home is an urge to drink. I do a little doze of LSD that will help focus on the chemical charts from the lab I need to go through.

I talked to Mr. Ortiz again. He is on my team now. I should be careful with a man like him. Considering his background, he can outplay the smartest men.

But his daughter is in my hands. Despite his undercover ways, I know she is the most precious thing in his life. So, hopefully, soon, my island will be the most important agenda on his list.

Kat is on my mind again. She is like sand under my feet on a perfectly clean marble floor.

Her smile at the surveillance guy who came over to talk to her earlier was beyond friendly. Only several days at the Center, and she's charmed half of the employees and is on a first-name basis with them. Fucking *Amir* asked about her—the guy who is never interested in anything but work.

My cock is restless from the thoughts about her. I know she's not a date kinda girl. And I'm not interested in dating. What I need is a quick relief, and I'm sure she would be up for it if I played correctly.

Marlow dropped off her file the other day. I grab it from the desk in my office and walk out into the living room, sit down on the couch and flip through it.

There is nothing really new in it.

Ukrainian mother, deceased. Puerto Rican father, former Navy SEAL, undercover and special ops.

Kat is a tumbleweed. Six years in California, seven in Arizona, three in Thailand, and three in Pennsylvania. Homeschooled in the US. Private tutor in Bangkok. Muay Thai Camp. First aid responder after the Change. Volunteer for FEMA—impressive. Survivalist training. Fluent Russian, some basic Ukrainian and Spanish. Drug charges in Bangkok—dismissed. Assault charges in PA, two. Withdrawn.

Five-foot-four.

Hazel eyes.

Age—nineteen.

I throw the file on the coffee table and lean back, taking a lazy sip of cognac.

“Ka-tu-ra Or-tiz,” I roll the syllables on my tongue. They are abrasive. *She* is abrasive. Untamed. Way over her head. With too much baggage for her age.

I think of jerking off. My phone is in my hand. I smile to myself as I open the folder with screenshots—particularly one—a cam view of Kat standing on the cliffs on the Eastside two weeks ago and studying the coast.

She looks hot in the bikini. Her hair partially falls over one shoulder and is tossed by the wind.

Lara Croft comes to mind.

I rub my hardening dick through my jeans.

The wild thing is beautiful and sporty, though my tastes always veered toward the more feminine type. She definitely lacks sophistication, and maybe that’s what makes me hard—I never needed to tame a girl or try even remotely hard enough to woo one.

I know I can get what I want from her, but it will be like capturing a leopard, petting it, then feeling the sharp pain of its claws that pounce as it gets away and runs off into the jungle.

I adjust my cock in my jeans—I really need to get my dick sucked. Preferably by this wild thing.

Our encounter is still fresh in my mind and angers me.

How hard I was when I caught her spying on one of my guys having sex with an escort.

How wet she was when I slid my hand to work her soaked pussy as we both watched like voyeurs from the shadows.

How much I was looking forward to banging her cockiness and my anger away.

How pissed I was—still am—when she pushed my hand away.

“I appreciate your effort.”

A smirk on her full lips.

The little spy will witness my effort very fucking soon.

Impatience tickles my nerves.

And then later that evening...

Right, she choked me out.

Blood suddenly boils in my veins at the memory. I completely forgot that episode.

My thumb flips through my living room camera footage on the night when Droga, Callie, and Kat walked into my villa.

I was way too drunk then, but the footage refreshes my memory as my eyes focus on the screen.

There are four of us. I am facing Droga and Callie. Kat is behind me, walking slowly, like she is circling the prey—me, of all people—the nerve!

And then her head snaps toward me.

What the hell did I say? I can't recall.

Next, she jumps me from the back, straddling my hips, her arm wrapping around my neck as she chokes me out, jumps off softly like a cat back onto the floor, and lets my body sink down.

The fuck...

I pause the footage, my stomach dropping so low I feel like gravity is increasing. That looked like some movie shit. And I can't believe that the person who went down onto the floor is me.

I rewind and rewatch that part again.

Jump. Straddle. Choke. Holding my body as I go the fuck down.

I can't stop watching. And not because of how flawlessly it's been done. But because it's a pretty girl making me sink to the floor like a rag doll.

Fuck...

I keep watching the video further. A minute after Droga and Callie are gone, Kat sits on her haunches by my motionless body, checks my pulse, and then...

A smile spreads on her lips as she taps my nose with her forefinger.

A fucking tap!

Like I am a kid.

I see red. And rewind that moment again.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

On repeat.

And her smile.

Katura. Fucking. Ortiz.

I'm gonna...

I don't finish the thought.

I will make her pay. I will fuck the hell out of her.

Yes, you are screwed, kitten. Or will be. So many times, you will beg for mercy. I'll put a leash on you and fuck you until you tap out.

Tap.

I almost throw the phone at the wall but stop myself.

I keep watching the footage—me getting up from the floor as she sits on my couch with her feet up, crossed arrogantly on top of my favorite coffee table.

My. Motherfucking. Coffee table!

She has no idea that it cost fifty Gs or that it's an antique, made out of volcanic rock that was recovered centuries ago.

And then her words. *"Welcome back, Mr. Chancellor."*

Oh, I wish she was right here. I would bend her over that very coffee table and make her scream apologies for everything that's holy.

I praise myself for always being in control. Except for lately. Drinking, coke, Dad with his demands, never-ending work... I was slipping for a month, I know. But who gives a shit about me? Everyone cares about this island. Gen-Alpha board members only care about money and power. Dad—about his dirty political games.

This pretty spy on my island has her own agenda. Everyone is in it for themselves.

The memory of her grinding into my hand at that escort party makes me even madder.

Women drool over me. They come at my mere touch. And this one... her...

I try to pace my breathing, only now noticing that my dick is hard like concrete.

I walk to the bar and make myself a drink. But no. Even a sip of *Ararat*, the best Armenian cognac, doesn't cut it this time.

What I want is to sink my cock into that wild thing and see her O-face instead of that arrogant smile. Make my cum spill down her beautiful tits. Fuck her until she can't walk straight.

I pick up the phone and dial Kat.

Now that she has the phone, I'll make sure she hears from me any time, day or night. She'll be at my side whenever I snap my fingers.

"Yes?"

The familiar voice on the other line makes me shiver in anger and... anticipation. I can almost hear a smile in her voice.

“We need to talk,” I try to say calmly, though in my mind I’m spitting out every syllable. The gloves are off. I have no patience for the slow game of seduction. “At my villa.”

I cut the call and wait.

Kitty, kitty, kitty.

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KAT

OH, LOOK! MR. CHANCELLOR WOLF-WHISTLES AND THE GIRL COMES running.

Yeah. No. Nuh-huh.

Not happening.

The last several days were quiet. Dad agreed to help Archer, or me, to be exact, with his info connections.

Fine.

Archer is sinking his claws into my family—*my* fault—also fine. It might work out.

What's not working out well is my ability to keep my thoughts straight.

Every time I see Archer, I feel challenged.

There is no denying the sexual overtone in every conversation we have, even if it's not said out loud. Granted, we already crossed the line once. My bad!

I can't get rid of the memories of his escort party I crashed two weeks ago.

Would you like a hand for quick relief?

To be fair, that was before he officially became my boss.

Observing him has become my favorite thing. What he does. How he moves. How he interacts with people. *Forbes 30 Under 30*—he seemed like a unicorn before. But now the god is becoming a little more human.

He thinks he watches me. Ditto. I notice everything. I see how hard Margot tries to get close to him. How indifferent he is—maybe he already fucked her and lost interest. How irritated he gets when interrupted. How

suddenly quiet and somewhat soft he occasionally gets when he is on the phone—I learned those phone calls come from his dad, Secretary Crone. They are not close, though Archer wants to be—it's in the sharp line of his pressed lips when the call is done, how suddenly quiet and indifferent he gets for a moment. I know what disappointment looks like.

After his mother and little brother died in a car crash twelve years ago, he is the only child of a single dad.

Just like me.

We don't know each other well. We are completely opposite. Yet the similarities are the most random.

I can tell by the way he looks at me, how his body reacts to mine when we are close that he wants me.

Have at it, Mr. Chancellor.

I got my first order of clothes from the mainland and squealed in excitement when I unwrapped shorts and cargo pants, dresses, bikinis, underwear—oh, god!—underwear, for Christ's sake! And not just cheap cotton stuff but from some boutique, which was the only option on the Thrive account. Tractor boots. Sandals.

I flaunt it now. Nothing makes you feel as confident as wearing clothes you love.

For Archer, tsk-tsk.

I see him glance at my clothes. He is learning my style.

Wait till I wear a dress, asshole.

He is a predator. An alpha. But I don't like to be ordered around. He might be cold, but I am calculated. He comes across as emotionless. I don't give away my feelings either, which probably makes him wonder. He does crazy shit, but it's planned and intentional. I act crazy, but it has logic.

What makes me mad is the way he dismisses me. Every. Single. Time. Like I am entertainment. It's an invisible battle.

But I won't bend. Nor will I run to him every time he curls his finger to summon me. He thinks I'm playing around with work. I'll prove I can be useful. He just doesn't know I have different methods.

There are seven files in a separate pile on my desk—the Eastern European guards, whose bios I studied front to back. Marlow connected me with the security team's HR, so I got the info about their schedules.

Yesterday, I went by post 43, on the Eastern side of Ayana, right along the back road.

Perfect.

Jogging was my cover as I stopped, Ayana green yoga uniform, hair tied in a bun, sweating, hands on my knees and panting to chat with—ta-da—Pasha and Kolya, two guards in their thirties, one Russian, the other Ukrainian.

Oh, I can be friendly as hell. My smile can seduce the grumpiest of men.

So, when I feigned cheerful laughter and chirped away about life at Ayana and joked about the martial arts classes I take on the beach—lies, lies, and more lies—Kolya slid his eyes up and down my body—ew, but I dealt with it—and murmured to the other guy in Russian that he could do me all night long.

The words yanked me into the past for a hot second.

“Wanna play, darlin’? How about you show us some moves? That sweet ass of yours can move.”

“Brandon, hold her down. Hold her the fuck down! Fucking hold her!

“Cover her mouth!”

“Fucking bitch. Trying to bite.”

“Get your hands off. You’ll get your turn when I’m done.”

I felt nauseous at the memory, the words that brought me back to that dark night back home.

Instead, I forced a smile, tucking away my loathing. I could easily break this guard’s nose just like that guy back home who filed charges against me.

“I can teach you better than any instructor,” the Ukrainian guard said with a seductive smile, the accent sharp like a round of AK-47.

Eastern European men, for the most part, have the faces of serial killers from deep-country mugshots, but man, do they know how to project that alpha energy.

“Deal,” I blurted, keeping my fake grin so hard my mouth hurt.

So today, after Mr. Chancellor summons me to his house—time not specified, so I don’t care, should’ve been more specific, so he can wait—I head to the Diggs, the security personnel living quarters out in the jungle by the Northern entrance to Ayana.

Nothing reckless.

I’ll just play around, get to know people, and hopefully, get deeper into their circle to find out if these guys have any ties to Mother Russia. I’ll

throw some Russian words around, too. Granted, I can do that without an accent.

Their reaction is what I look for.

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ARCHER

I CHECK MYSELF IN THE MIRROR, READ THE LATEST *CHEMICALS REVIEWS* ON my phone for some time. Only when an hour goes by and there is no sign of Kat do I start suspecting that she ditched me.

She is playing games, and I don't like it.

I open the tracking app. Zion map appears on the screen, and a green dot—Kat's phone—is in the Diggs.

What the hell is she doing in the security employees' quarters?

Several girls had flings with the security guards—that was the only reason any girls ever went to the Diggs. Whatever Kat's reason is, she should've cleared with me first.

In a minute, I fly through Ayana on my Superbike at full speed toward the Center, irritation simmering inside me.

I get one of the surveillance guys in the Center to pull up the cameras in the Diggs. The one at the entrance—the wide-angle view of the several buildings—is enough to let me spot a group of guys at one of the condo buildings.

"Zoom in on them," I order, burning holes in the screen as I watch guys drinking beer and smoking in a wide circle. In the center—Kat and another guy engaged in a fight.

There's no sound. For a second, my heartbeat spikes as I think she is being attacked until I realize they are... practicing?

Anger simmers in me. My eyes are glued to the screen.

The guy steps into Kat, and she pushes him in the chest with her palm. He takes her wrist—every move as if in slow motion—but she grabs his,

then twists in her spot, and throws him over her shoulder. The guy is splayed on the ground as she sets her foot on his chest, arms up in the air as if in victory.

Fucking Kat.

The fact that she is hanging out with the guys who came from war zones and have done things that would make her throw up in shock is not to my liking. Especially since by now, she was supposed to be at my villa.

I dial her number. On the screen, she looks down at her pants but doesn't pull her phone out of her pocket.

"Thanks," I throw to the surveillance guy, storm out of the building, and jump on my bike.

I try to hold back anger, then realize that I'm driving too recklessly and slow down, reaching the turn toward the Diggs and in a minute pull onto the road that splits the Diggs in the center.

I spot the group where they were ten minutes ago and drive right up to their feet.

"Whoa, buddy, easy," one of the guys says, moving aside.

The circle widens.

Kat and the other guy in the center and turn toward me.

Some guys are still in their security uniforms. Others wear pants and tanks. All of them are buff, some three times my size.

It's a brief thought—if someone really wanted to, he could've taken me out right here. I have no gun on me. And though I can take several guys, some of these guys are killing machines. Slate insists on escorting me anywhere outside Ayana. Inside is a safe haven. Or supposed to be.

"You lost, buddy?" the guy in the center, who was just playing with Kat, asks with a cocky smirk on his face.

Kat stares at me without a word.

"Mr. Crone, how are you?" one of the guys says—the one who has the brains to know who I am—and the rest exchange uneasy glances and mouth something to each other, taking slow steps back.

The cocky asshole's expression changes. "Sorry, boss. She came on her own."

I lock eyes with Kat, whose scorching gaze can melt steel.

"What do you think you are doing?" I ask calmly, not paying attention to the rest, who start dispersing, walking away, and disappearing into the buildings. Whispers come from the balcony above.

“Sharpening my skills,” she says calmly and takes a step closer.

The quarters are suddenly too quiet. But I know there are eyes and ears everywhere.

“Next time you decide to do that, you clear it with me,” I say sharply, my hands holding the handlebars so firmly they turn white.

I have no business in this shithole and shouldn’t be here on my own. Especially chasing a girl.

Kat takes another step toward me, slow and laidback, her chin tipping up. “I wasn’t aware I need to consult you on how I spend my free time.”

I scan the buildings around us, noticing faces here and there staring with curiosity. “This is your idea of spending free time?”

“Maybe?”

“Chasing adrenalin? Because there are better ways.”

“Which are?”

“Get on the bike.”

“What, you gonna—”

“I said get. On. The bike, Kat.”

She does, and we leave the Diggs. But a minute into the ride, I stop in the middle of the dirt road in the jungle, before it veers into the main Ayana area, and kill the engine.

“Number one,” I say coldly, trying to subdue my irritation, turning my head sideways so she can hear. “Ayana residents don’t fraternize with staff.”

She is quiet, but I hear a little puff of annoyance.

“Number two, if you came here to look for friends, you can go back to the mainland. Last time I checked, you have a job to do.”

“I was doing my job, Archer. Stop being a control freak.”

“Number three. These guys are not *friendly*. Their backgrounds and lifestyle leave much to be desired. No girl should be out there on her own. Chasing an adrenalin high,” I add bitterly.

I feel her lean into me, her lips next to my ear when she whispers, “You have better ideas for entertainment?”

A shiver goes through me. I know what it’s like to chase the high but not be able to find one. And there’s only one way to kill the anger inside me—adrenalin.

“You want adrenalin, kitten—I’ll give you adrenalin. Let’s go for a ride. I need your hands on my waist.”

For the ride she wants, she needs to hold on to me. She puts her hands on my waist like she is holding a porcelain antique, and she is too high on the back of the bike.

I grab her thighs and yank her closer to me so her thighs are tightly pressed on each side of mine. Then I grab her hands and yank them forward, wrapping them around my waist. “Hold tight. I don’t want to lose you just yet.”

I smile as I fire up the engine.

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ARCHER

I DRIVE AT QUARTER SPEED ALONG THE EASTERN SIDE OF AYANA. THERE are vehicles and people on the road, so I can't go fast. But when we approach the southern gate, I rev the bike into a higher gear.

We fly past the gate security and enter the dirt road that leads down the southern coast.

I wish I had my Aston Martin Vulcan and a straight highway. I miss that. The speed. The freedom. Open spaces. Choices.

But there is a wild thing behind me. And even though a minute ago I was mad at her, I now want her to feel what I feel—a rush.

Adrenalin helps combat negative emotions. But when it has no release, it can escalate anger and stress.

I need any release I can get. I've never been around a woman who makes me feel this way—my mood swinging like a fucking pendulum.

My MTT Turbine Superbike “Street Fighter” is designed to go up to 250 miles an hour, but it would be reckless to do more than a hundred on a dirt road.

This island limits everything. I miss the times on the mainland before the change. When we partied like we owned the nights. When the world was ours to conquer. When we had the future ahead of us, not limited and not threatened by the fallout.

I fire up to the next gear and swish through the jungle.

I know this road by heart. I drove it dozens of times. Alone. Trying to imagine that I can go anywhere—for hundreds of miles at full speed.

I'm not even at half-speed. This bike can be a monster, but I have to be tame. The arms wrapped around my waist add caution to this trip. I've been reckless too many times before.

The bike zooms down the road that slopes toward the open area—the southern coast of Zion, the green jungle cascading uphill on the left, the azure blanket of the ocean on the right, and the heavy white clouds weighing down from above.

Kat's arms tighten around me. She doesn't say anything, the motor loud, the wind swishing in my ears even louder, but it's a sign she likes it.

The view is gorgeous. You get used to it. But if you forget for a moment that you are on an island that has a noose around your neck and won't let go, you can imagine that you are anywhere in the world.

They say the world is your oyster.

Well, this island is a beautiful prison cell.

We ride for half an hour and are about to reach our destination when I slow down to first gear.

"Hold on tight and lean into me," I tell Kat over my shoulder, my heart pumping with adrenalin. "Tighter! And don't wobble. Got it?"

"Yes!" she shouts back, her arms around my waist in an iron lock.

My heart rate spikes as I jam the front brake suddenly, which brings the rear tire up in the air.

I push the weight onto the front wheel and release the brake, getting the bike rolling on the front wheel, and making Kat squeal behind me.

The "rolling stoppie" gave me plenty of road rash back in the day. I used to be reckless, but Droga and I perfected it.

I release the brake completely, and the bike drops down.

I pull up to the beach, and before stopping, do the "burnout"—use the throttle and the clutch while holding the front brake. The back tire starts sliding, pushing the bike to spin in circles with smoke rising around us.

When I finally stop and kill the engine, Kat exhales, "Wow! What was *that?*"

"Just some tricks."

If I knew what kind of rider she was, I would've showed her the "front wheelie"—riding on the back tire only. But that requires a lot of trust in the partner.

For a moment, we are silent, staring at the big waves crashing into the shore.

I don't want to lecture her. But I don't want her to end up in a dangerous situation.

More than anything, it bothers me that she chooses to spend time with anyone but me. And some contractors, of all people.

Ah, fuck. Here it is. I'm irritated that this girl hasn't gotten hung up on me like others before.

"You come here often?" she asks calmly. Her grip around me loosens.

Adrenalin—it's a mediator.

Usually, her voice jerks me out of my comfort zone. Right now, it's almost seductive.

Her body is pressed tightly against mine, her thighs hugging mine. That's another best part about the sports bikes besides speed—when you have a girl behind you, she'll eventually slide so tightly against your lower back that you become like conjoined twins. This should be sports bikes' selling point—taking girls on rides for more friction.

"Sometimes," I say.

"What do you do here?"

"Imagine that I'm not here."

It's a nice afternoon. One of hundreds during a year.

I am not even sure why I brought her here. This is *my* beach. Bishop comes here to surf. I used to join him, but I haven't done it in more than a year.

This used to be a surfer camp. There are still open cabanas and gazebos at the edge of the jungle, overgrown and half-down from the previous storm season.

The air is thick with moisture. It will rain soon. But I don't care. It's been a while since I let go. Being outside Ayana is liberating. In a different life, this could be a date.

Kat shifts and gets off the bike.

"Come on!" She motions as she starts stomping across the sand toward the water, then turns and walks backward, a smile on her face.

Her smile is beautiful when she is not faking it. Usually, when something surprises or amazes her.

The energy between us is strange, to say the least. One minute it's a cat-and-mouse game. Another, it's some awkward bonding as if we share something no one else knows about.

It's unexplainable. Kat is here for a short while. But the more I see her, the more I want to get close to her, learn everything I can about her.

She wiggles her fingers at me at a distance. "Come!" She nods toward the water. "Let's swim!"

She is wild. Like a fishing bobber when the fish is on the hook—constantly up and down. Anger and happiness. Cockiness and genuine amazement. I can't figure her out. One minute, she is arrogant. The next, she laughs and smiles like we are friends.

I prop the bike, watching her pull her tank off and throw it on the sand.

There's a black bra underneath it, and I freeze for a moment. I hope this is going where I think it's going.

Go on, kitten...

She starts wiggling her hips, taking down her cargo pants—lacy blank panties underneath.

Fuck.

Her body is gorgeous. I've seen her in a bikini on cam. Up close, it's intimate, though obviously, she doesn't think so. Shyness is not in her nature.

A second-long thought of what it would feel like dragging my tongue along her beautiful legs runs through my head as I start walking toward her.

"Let's go, Archer!" she shouts. "Come on! Don't be uptight."

Uptight.

I snort but pull my shirt over my head.

Fuck it.

Her sudden bursts of enthusiasm are so contagious that once you see a glimpse of her genuine self, you can't stay away.

I strip down to my boxer briefs, aware of my naked body and the fact that it's the worst underwear to get wet in.

But Kat is not looking at me. With a squeal, she runs into the water and dives in, cutting a wave.

In a minute, I follow, the warm water caressing my skin.

Kat's head appears above water twenty or so feet away, and she dives in again, her feet blinking above water and disappearing.

The girl can swim—I noticed that on cameras on the Eastside. She is like a dolphin, and I can't stop watching. She is a hint of fire and storm. She is many things that take me by surprise.

She dives in and breaks the surface numerous times, seemingly not paying attention to me anymore.

But I take in every inch of her. Every movement. Every second spent together. She puts me on high alert, but it's not just her agenda on this island.

There's something else.

My unexplainable hunger for her spontaneousness. Her ability to switch from calculation to recklessness. Her being so... alive. While the rest of us simmer in day-to-day mediocrity.

She might've called herself an adrenalin junkie, but *she* is a shot of adrenalin. And despite all the rationalizations that became my second nature, my body craves her on the most primitive animalistic level.

My boxer briefs are wet, and I'm getting a hard-on.

And just like that, I decide to play two games.

I'll be her boss by day.

But outside work, I'll claim this wild thing for myself.

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KAT

ARCHER MIGHT BE A GENIUS SCIENTIST, BUT I'M SURE AS HELL HE possesses some voodoo magic.

How else do you explain that I feel like jumping out of my skin when he is around?

I've never ridden so fast on a bike. And on a dirt road at that.

And that cologne, so smooth and masculine yet the most powerful potent scent that makes him smell like hot dirty sex.

Jesus, I need a break from him. Because all I think about when he is close is being even closer.

I dive underwater again and again to subdue the giddiness and tremors from being around Archer. I read his file so many times before coming to Zion that the initial fascination should've been dulled.

Instead, it's worse.

I come up to the surface and hear him call my name.

He points upward—in the last ten minutes, the clouds changed from heavy white to something that looks like a dirty down blanket that will crash from the sky.

It's gotten darker.

The air is thicker.

"It's going to pour!" Archer shouts and starts swimming toward the shore.

That's the tropics for you—the sun closes its eyes just for a moment, and the rain sweeps in.

Before I reach the shore, the heavy raindrops already whisper against the sand and thump on my skin, and when I run out onto the beach, it comes down like a wall.

Archer is pulling his jeans on. Tsk, I'd rather see him completely naked.

I pull on my cargo pants that are already wet, refusing to properly slide up my wet legs. The tank top is sandy, but I put it on anyway, and in seconds, my clothes are plastered to my body.

"Over there!" Archer squints through the rain at me and points toward an abandoned shack.

Riding in this downpour is stupid, I agree, so I run barefoot after Archer.

We pant as we run under the roof of the open shack and stop in front of each other, both of us wiping the water from our faces.

I smile, smoothing my hair and dragging my hands along its length, squeezing out the water.

My eyes are on Archer.

His are on me.

And what do you know—a smile comes onto Mr. Chancellor's lips as he burns me with his stare.

"You always come with trouble, huh?" he says, his voice mixing with the sound of the rain clacking against the roof.

The world suddenly separates—the one outside the shack and the hissing of the downpour, and us in a twenty by twenty space, sheltered under the roof.

I raise my brows. "Trouble? It's just rain."

Archer wipes his face again, stepping closer, his bare chest, muscled and glistening with moisture, right in front of me.

I grin. "*You* brought us here, remember?"

He is shirtless, barefoot, and it's the messiest I've seen him—the meticulous Archer who never has a strand of hair out of place unless it's on purpose.

This makes him more approachable.

Though right now, he is the one approaching me. One tiny step at a time. All the while wiping his hair, the water trickling down his bare chest as my eyes follow.

God, his body is gorgeous. I just want to touch it.

"See something you like?"

His voice brings my eyes back to his—cunning, scorching, lustful.

He knows what I'm thinking. But I'm not afraid to say it.

With a smile, I lift my chin.

"Yeah, I do."

That's my guidance. Life is short. So travel to a tropical island. Swim in the storm. Sleep with your cocky hot boss...

Goddamn my tongue.

Or not.

Because in a moment, Archer steps into me and his hands cup my face as his mouth crashes into mine, wiping any other thoughts from my mind.

Archer kisses like he hasn't done it for the longest time. And thank God for whatever kept him away from women, unless he is that invested every time he kisses a girl.

Bossy cocky guys like him can be rough. Archer's lips are anything but. They are just the right amount of hard and soft, and his tongue, stroking into my mouth, makes me whimper and thank the sound of the heavy rain that disguises this moment of my weakness.

His hands let go and wrap around my waist.

My mind is dizzy.

He is leaning into me. His body is pure taut muscles, bending me backward, his hands sliding under my shirt and up my back.

I've never had this much want for any guy. Like we took some drugs—granted, I did that before many times and know how it can override your natural hormones.

But we are sober, yet I feel high as we devour each other's mouths.

The kiss escalates in seconds.

Our hands start grabbing at each other.

Mine slide up and down his torso.

His are doing the same, hiking my shirt up and squeezing my breasts through my bra.

In a minute, there's no control or calculation.

Fuck it.

I want him.

We can totally do this and pretend back at Ayana that nothing happened. No one will find out.

I pull away abruptly. "Cameras?"

His pupils are dilated, the water droplets on his face so sexy that I want to lick them off.

“No. Not on this shack,” he blurts out and crashes his mouth to mine again.

While my brain is out, my hands go for his zipper, undo his jeans and push them down.

He frantically undoes my cargo pants. And we struggle for a moment, the wet clothes unwilling to go lower.

The rain pounds in sync with my heartbeat. The smell of wet jungle and sand tightens my senses. Waves crash at the shore. The storm is all around and inside me as we madly kiss with our pants and underwear around our thighs.

Desire shoots like a spear through my core when Archer’s hand slides between my legs.

I moan into his mouth. I don’t care. I’m not even sure if his touch is expertly good or I’m just too horny.

I can feel him tense with need too. My hand finds his erection, and—holy fuck!—even to the touch he is perfect, thick and heavy.

He groans, letting go of my mouth just for a moment. His hand grips my ass, his other starts rubbing my clit, and I match the speed, stroking his cock, my other hand cupping his balls.

He is not kissing me anymore. But my face is still lifted toward his, his parted lips inches apart from mine, both of us panting and jerking each other off.

I can come like this. In twenty or thirty seconds, I will.

But he lets go, takes his cock from my hand, and bucks his hips at me, bringing his tip between my legs and rubbing it back and forth against my wet center.

“Fuuuck,” he hisses, bends his knees, and tries to push himself inside me.

“Ah!” I cry out at the sudden sharp pain.

Not where he touches me but on my ankle.

What the hell?

It’s so unexpected, so sharp that my mouth falls open.

My body goes rigid.

“What is it?” Archer blurts out, pausing, his eyes searching my face for signs.

I yank my pants up and bend over to see.

And there it is—a red-white-black snake just two feet away from my foot...

“Shit,” I whisper and look at my foot—a small bite mark right on my ankle, below the pants. “It bit me.” I lift my face in shock at Archer. “Archer?” I say barely audibly.

He’s already pulling his jeans up and takes my hand. “Slowly. Move away slowly.”

I follow him as he tugs me away, his grip so tight it almost hurts.

Both our eyes are on the snake that coils on the ground as we creep away.

“Archer,” I whisper, turning toward him. “I don’t know much about snakes. Is it poisonous?”

My heart thuds like a drum.

He doesn’t look at me, only at the creature several feet away, as he slowly leads me from under the roof and into the rain, cool against my hot skin.

“Archer!” I don’t take my eyes away from his face that’s suddenly cold and serious. “Is it poisonous?” I almost shout at him, panic rising in my chest.

He doesn’t look at me when he motions with his head. “Let’s go,” he snaps and yanks me away.

ARCHER

I'VE BEEN COCK-BLOCKED A FEW TIMES IN MY LIFE.

But never by a venomous snake.

What's the least likely thing to happen to a couple in the jungle, about to get hot and dirty?

A snake bite.

The worst thing?

A venomous one.

In the middle of nowhere.

During a downpour.

Katura Ortiz brings the strangest scenarios into my life, and it's becoming a common occurrence.

She's silently freaking out, I can tell. It's in her voice when she shouts, "Archer! Is it venomous?"

Out of many snake varieties on this island, only two are poisonous, and the one that bit Kat is a coral snake.

Fuck.

I pull Kat by her wrist away from the shack, and she follows with a panicky look on her face.

I run ahead of her onto the beach, snatch my shirt from the sand, and I come back to her. Then drop to my knees, ripping a long piece out of my shirt with my teeth.

"Come here." I yank her foot onto my thigh and wrap the cloth string above the bite.

This really won't do much, but precaution doesn't hurt. Sucking the poison can only increase the infection.

"Is it a venomous snake?" she asks for the dozenth time.

Shut up, Kat.

The worst part about this bite is the respiratory failure that might come later. So we need to get to the medical ward asap.

"Archer!" she shouts, and I finally look at her as I get up.

In my mind, I know that the chances of allergic reaction or respiratory failure are low. But looking at Kat, I feel helpless. Blood pounds in my head at the thought.

She senses it. "Archer," she repeats.

I palm her cheeks, a little too roughly, bringing my face closer to her, blinking through the rain that blinds me. "You'll be fine." I try to sound calm so that she doesn't freak out. "Come on!"

I pick up my bike and fire it up. And when Kat puts her hands on my waist, I yank them forward and wrap her arms tightly around me.

I am mad. Mad at myself for being reckless and the cause of this. Mad at the rain pouring down as I try to veer my Superbike through the washed-out dirt road at the fastest speed I can in this weather. Which is still painfully slow.

The rain subsides, though still slashes at my bare chest as we enter Ayana. In minutes, we pull up to the doctor's, and I help Kat off the bike.

"You alright?" I ask her.

She looks mad, too. Maybe scared and doesn't want to show it.

"Am I supposed to be dropping dead?" She tries to joke, but her gaze is uncertain.

I walk past the reception, asking, "Where's Doc?"

"In room fifteen with a patient," the receptionist answers but doesn't stop me—a perk of owning everything on this island, hence getting things done fast.

I open a random door and tell Kat to wait while I go and get Doc.

Dr. Hodges is in his forties, a little younger than my Dad. He gives me an up-and-down look as we hurry toward Kat's room. This is the most unprofessional he's ever seen me. Thank God I have jeans on.

"It was a coral snake," I explain fast while we are walking through the hallway. "Shallow wound. Could be a dry one. About half an hour ago. She

doesn't have any medical conditions that I know of. No medication allergies."

"She told you that?"

"I've read her file."

Doc nods, though I'm sure it sounds weird.

"She might need antivenom but a blood cell test—"

"Archer." Doc stops before entering the room Kat is in and faces me with a soft smile. "I got it. Relax."

I ruffle my hair, nodding quickly.

He opens the door and blocks me as I try to follow him.

"Oh, I'm going in with you," I say.

His lips curl in a tiny smile. "If the patient doesn't mind."

"The patient is my responsibility," I snap.

Kat is a trooper, but it's the second time—the first being when I confronted her about her little spy mission—that I see her lacking confidence. Her hair and clothes are soaked as she sits on a chair with her hands jammed between her thighs, hunching just slightly.

Her brows furrow cutely as I walk in. "Do you mind?" She motions toward the door.

"I do." I force a smile and sit down in the chair as Doc purses his lips.

"I am Doctor Hodges," he introduces himself.

Kat nods and visibly relaxes.

It's a simple procedure as Doc examines the wound, then takes blood samples, and asks Kat in a soft calming voice all sorts of questions about her health, allergies, and family medical history.

The snake episode completely wiped away the feeling of what happened right before that. But now that I know Kat is potentially out of danger, the memory comes back.

Her hot mouth on mine.

Her hands undoing my jeans.

My cock in her palm.

Her pussy slick with want as we were about to get down to it.

The motherfucking snake!

Irritation rises in me, but with it, the need that coils inside as that hot kiss flickers in my mind.

Kat is even more gorgeous when she is disheveled and wet. Well, in any connotation. I would towel her dry. Maybe, I should offer. Though it's

pretty ungentlemanlike to think about this while she still can potentially have complications.

“You’ll stay here overnight,” Doc tells her. “We will get the results of the blood test in a bit to determine the amount of poison in your system.”

“Overnight?” Kat frowns. “But you just said the bite wasn’t that dangerous.”

“We don’t know yet. We should observe you for twenty-four hours. In case of any adverse effects.”

“Like what?”

Like I said, she’d be prettier if she didn’t open her mouth. Unless it opens for a good reason, and I don’t mean talking.

“Coral venom is a highly potent neurotoxin,” I say from my seat as I fold my forearms. I’m still shirtless. It’s a weird scenario, to say the least. “It might not affect you right away but instead spread through your lymphatic system and cause neurotoxicity or respiratory failure hours later.”

She stills.

That’s right, kitten—I can be your personal doctor.

“What does that mean?” Her eyes shift to Doc, who looks back at me, and so does she.

“Simply put,” I add, irritated that she doesn’t trust my knowledge, “either you start having coordination issues and neurological malfunction, or you suffocate.”

She swallows hard and looks at Doc for confirmation.

Fuck you, Kat.

Doc nods.

Her lips tighten. “I can stay at my place, and if anything happens, I can call you, right?”

Unfuckingbelievable.

“And if you pass out and die from respiratory malfunction, who’ll be responsible?” I say sharply.

Doc confirms with a nod. “You can’t be unsupervised.”

“So I’ll stay with a friend.”

I snort. “Like who?” She hasn’t made any friends yet.

“I’ll stay with Marlow.”

I swear, I can almost see a forked tongue peeking between her pretty full lips as her eyes shoot arrows at me. Kat might be fine, but that snake might’ve died.

“Not a chance,” I say slowly. And no, it’s not jealousy. It’s anger. Because Marlow somehow managed to buy her trust, and I want to strangle the motherfucker.

“Yes, chance,” she argues.

“You are staying with me.”

“What?” She gapes at me just as Doc snaps his head in my direction and stares in curiosity.

“You heard me,” I say, gloating over her shock.

“No.” She snorts. “Not a chance.”

“I work at night. I can monitor you.”

“I don’t need to be monitored through a creepy-ass camera or anything,” she snaps, then murmurs, “Sorry, Doc.”

“Well, here are your choices, sweetheart.” I grit my teeth. “Either I lock you up in this room overnight so you don’t escape and die somewhere on the streets, snooping around.”

I smile because the anger on her face at my words is precious, and she glides a hand along her wet hair in that manner that gives her away.

God, I love that I learn all these little quirks about her.

“Or you stay at *my* place, have a nice dinner and—pinky swear—I’ll turn off my cameras, and we can discuss work.”

She crosses her arms at her chest to mimic me. It’s cute. It’s nice to have her cornered. Even nicer to rub her the wrong way, to watch her trying to be calm as her nostrils flare just a little as she tries to control her breathing. Even though just half an hour ago she was laughing, splashing in the ocean, and sticking her hand into my briefs.

Our eyes lock as she tries to figure out why I’m doing this.

No reason other than for my own sardonic enjoyment.

“Fine. What’s for dinner?”

KAT

WHEN WE LEAVE DOC'S, THE SKY OUTSIDE IS CLEAR, THE SUN SETTING OVER the horizon, enveloping Ayana in an orange glow. Parrots chirp cheerfully in plumeria trees as if the storm was a dream.

We don't say a word as we ride to Cliff Villa, even though we were pawing each other only an hour ago. Doc gave me some medication, and I hope it doesn't knock me out.

I've been to Cliff Villa several times now. But it's the first time I'm invited and not sneaking in or barging in with requests.

Every time it wows me with its minimalistic grandness.

It's like walking into a giant reception area—a gray stone rectangle and bare floor, the space empty save for the dark-gray living room furniture, a charcoal cube in the center that serves as a coffee table, the mini bar on one side, and a desk on the other. The floor-to-ceiling windows open onto the terrace and infinity pool.

“Corlo, close the blinds, turn on the lounge playlist 41,” Archer says as he kicks off his shoes and pads barefoot toward the bar. “I would offer you a drink but you are not allowed to drink tonight.”

“Awe, ever a gentleman.”

“One day you'll get to enjoy it when I'm not,” he says quietly, but I heard it.

The music trickles through the invisible speakers.

Everything in Archer's villa happens almost silently. Anything unnecessary is hidden from sight. No sockets, no light fixtures, no cupboards, and not a single object lying around. It's minimalism at its best

and meticulousness at its grandest. Archer doesn't like clutter, I get it, not even in his personal space.

I am the exact opposite. If it were my home, I would've had exotic plants in every corner, weird art hanging on the walls, antiques on the shelves, a hundred shelves at that.

"A smart house, huh?" I run my hand over the couch back as I walk around toward the giant painting on the wall.

"Domotics."

"Do-what?"

"Smart home automation."

I finally kick off my damp shoes, hoping not to get penalized, because I did it in the middle of the room. Even the floor under my feet is rough like fine sandpaper yet cool and soothing.

The painting is the only decor—a piece of artwork the size of a large carpet, dark gray—surprise-surprise—with black surrealistic shapes and a bright red streak in the center.

"Is there a story here?"

"The red represents a speck of uniqueness," Archer explains from the other side of the room. "Or a trigger. It's subjective. To some, it's disturbing and out of place. To others—it's something they can't take their eyes off."

"Like what?"

"Anything. Talent. Curiosity. Personality. Looks. Unique experience. Anything that's out of the ordinary, really. A special person who becomes more important than the gray mass around."

Philosopher, huh?

"Well, gray seems like your favorite color," I say. Or maybe it's the color of wet concrete, hard and cold. Or charcoal—something that burnt down once upon a time. Quite fitting for Archer.

"It is," he confirms as he walks across the room slowly, a glass in his hand, his eyes on his phone screen as he types with his thumb.

His multitasking is impressive. I saw his megalomaniac side when he was on a binge. This Archer is different.

"We all think we are unique," he continues, still not looking at me. "An average person with a below-average IQ thinks he or she is different. In reality, most of us are not."

"Obviously, you are not talking about yourself."

Everything he does is slick and graceful. Unless he's flying off the handle. If he brushes his teeth—I wanna see it, cause it'll probably be TV-commercial-perfect.

The rectangular stone slabs disguise entrances to other rooms. I wonder what his bedroom is like. Or maybe, he will make me sleep on the couch.

Will we sleep?

I study him as he takes slow steps across the room, still busy with his phone.

The memory of our makeout on the beach creeps into my mind, and I feel my damp clothes more acutely, as well as my panties that are still soaked from the hot mess we started.

"You should take a shower," Archer says, finally tearing his gaze off the phone. Sand and saltwater are a messy combo, I agree. "Follow me."

I walk after him around one of the stone slabs, and it leads into the lit-up bedroom.

Wow.

I thought the living room is minimalistic—his bedroom is a dark-gray rectangular room with soft light seeping in from the seam along the perimeter of the floor.

The only furniture here is a king-size bed and a small stone shelf next to it with nothing on it.

"Does anyone live here?" I joke, my eyes frantically searching for anything else.

Archer chuckles. He comes over to the wall next to the bed and presses on a certain spot—that's when I notice the barely outlined square. There comes a soft pneumatic sound, and a large rectangular part of the wall, the size of a door, detaches from the wall, and moves forward and to the side, revealing a lit-up walk-in closet the size of my bedroom in Pennsylvania.

"Seriously," I blurt out, grinning like a fool, and walk toward it as Archer walks in.

There are racks of hanging clothes, mostly in black and gray.

"How many closets are in this room?" I ask, studying Archer as he pulls something from one of the shelves.

"Five." He passes me a red t-shirt.

I can't stop gaping. "This is awesome."

His lips curl in a smile. "I'll give you a full tour sometime." His phone beeps. "The food is here."

Oh.

I study the shirt in my hands. “Do you not have—”

“Girl clothes? No.” He waits until I walk out of the closet, then pushes the door that slowly creeps back in its place and locks with a soft click, the wall looking like it’s just a wall.

Damn.

“This shirt is large size but you’ll be fine,” Archer says, walking out of the room and not turning around.

A shirt? That’s it?

“The shower is that way.” He points to another stone slab that’s a wall. “Don’t let the food get cold.”

The last words echo from outside the bedroom, and I walk into the shower.

Wow. I gape around as I shed my damp jeans and tank, then peel off my panties and bra.

The bathroom is the size of a master bedroom. Open concept. A white bathtub. An alcove that’s lit up with multiple tiny lights. Four showerheads. Who the hell needs four showerheads?

I step into the alcove, staring at the handles that I have no idea how to use.

“Would you like to activate the shower?” The voice makes me almost jump. An AI. God damn you!

“Yes,” I blurt.

“Regular settings?”

“Yes.” I grin.

And when the perfect-temperature warm water starts cascading down my body, I close my eyes and understand why someone wants four showerheads. I would like one between my legs, too.

When I’m done—and the shower turns off on its own as soon as I step out—I pick up my damp hair, roll it into a rope, and tie it into a bun at the back of my head. Then towel myself dry and put on the shirt Archer gave me.

The shirt feels weird. The fabric is soft, almost silky to the touch as I smooth it down my body. It’s too large and comes down to just above my knees and somehow changes color. Or maybe it’s whatever drug that Doc gave me that’s starting to work.

The fact that I'm not wearing anything under it is a turn-on. But what the hell—I have nothing else to wear.

And maybe, just maybe...

I brush the images of Archer's hands on me at the beach away and hurry to the living room.

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ARCHER

THE SIGHT OF KAT IN A T-SHIRT IN MY KITCHEN MAKES ME TOO AWARE OF the fact that there's nothing under it.

I open the containers from Tapas.

"Spanish food?" she asks, sliding onto the stool by the kitchen island and looking around with curiosity.

"Yes. But there's a Thai dish," I say.

She looks at me in surprise. "I didn't know they make Thai on the island."

"Just this one dish."

"Awesome!" She grins, searching the open containers.

Bingo. I gathered since she lived in Thailand she would like Thai.

She loves it, devouring whatever that curry is with a spoon.

I love that about her. The way she studies everything with open curiosity, without pretending that she's seen it before. The way she reacts genuinely to things she likes or doesn't.

When she lets go of her act, she's a firecracker. It's an old-school word, but that's her spirit. We are a generation of overstimulated and bored people. But Kat absorbs the world around her like she was let out of captivity—with genuine amusement. And I want to be around her spark.

She finishes her meal in minutes. Her eyelids are drooping. The medication Doc gave her is working. She doesn't know it, but she'll be out in less than an hour.

A pity. We could've played around.

"Soooo, what's next?" she asks hesitantly as she pushes her plate away.

I barely ate, but watching her eat is almost as fulfilling.

I walk around the kitchen island and lean over behind her, taking the piece of grilled chicken she left on her plate and putting it in my mouth.

My hands are on the table, on each side of her, caving her in. I can smell my body wash on her. She smells like me, and it's driving me nuts.

"What would you like to do next?" I ask, studying her neck and the side of her face.

She is inches away from me, and I would like to do a whole bunch of things with her. But Doc said to keep her away from doing any physical activity that would spike her blood pressure.

I could give her a massage with a slow happy ending. We could watch a movie on a projector as I stroked her pussy. Granted, with a happy ending.

Every scenario in my head in her presence is of a happy ending, and it's fucking distracting.

"I don't know," she says quietly, a tiny smile on her face.

She sits with her legs crossed, the shirt tucked between them.

Here is the thing about that shirt—it's the latest scientific experiment, a gift from an entrepreneur. When I see it getting lighter in color, that red fading—between her legs, at her chest, and near her neck, she didn't notice it yet—I can't help but grin. That means her temperature is rising.

"I have to do some work," I say, seeing her smile fade. Kitten is disappointed. I lean closer to whisper in her ear, "And Doc said not to strain you physically."

I punctuate the last word and glance down at her shirt, noticing the two pebbles of her nipples poking through the fabric that's turning lighter by the minute.

The wild thing is getting hot, and I have to hold back a grin.

"Got it. Not straining," she says, biting her lip.

My phone beeps.

I push off the table to check it. It's Doc. He sent the test result, the poison chart, and the blood cell count.

Shit.

Not great.

There goes my hope of having a little playtime with the wild thing.

"You are taking my bed," I say coldly. "So get comfortable."

Kat is quiet, and when I meet her gaze, I wanna think it's as disappointed as mine. "No entertainment tonight?"

“Doc said you should relax.”

“Anything I should worry about?” There *is* worry in her eyes now.

“No. But you are going to bed.”

We exhale at the same time.

That fucking snake...

“If I sleep in your bed... where are *you* sleeping?” She doesn’t look away from me.

“If I am? Don’t worry about it.”

I know she wants more. *I* want more. But fuck, it’s a bit complicated when she might go into a respiratory arrest during the process. That would be just my luck.

“Let me know if there’s anything you need,” I say, parting with her in the living room and walking to the wall that hides the entrance to my office and will hide me away from her.

I can feel her stare. Know she is watching me, expecting something else. But if I’m next to her, with her wearing that shirt and nothing underneath, I won’t be able to keep my hands to myself.

I finally have the girl I’m hard for in my bed.

And the doctor’s orders are to leave her alone.

Shoot me.

ARCHER

I KEEP MY EYES ON THE COMPUTER SCREENS—THREE OF THEM OPEN AT once as I try to focus on work.

But my dick has a mind of its own. I imagine going over to my bedroom where the wild thing lies between my sheets, yanking her shirt up, and fucking her senseless.

The scenario has played out in my brain over a dozen times by now.

My dick is so heavy it hurts. I rub it through my jeans, then think of Kat stroking it, then think of touching her, and my dick throbs with the need for release.

It's been over two hours since I sent Kat to bed. Considering the medication strength Doc gave her, she should be asleep right now.

I leave the office with a drink in my hand, walk to my bedroom, and turn toward the bathroom.

She won't hear the water. I strip and step into the shower, my hard dick bobbing in the air like the wand of a traffic controller.

I wrap my hand around it and pump slowly, feeling relief at the touch.

Knowing the wild thing is behind the gray walls, almost naked in my bed, creates the tension that spreads down to my balls, making them ache with need. I imagine rubbing my cockhead against her full lips, her scorching gaze on me as I pump into her mouth, her hair splayed on her shoulders and falling down onto her tits, her nipples hard, her pussy wet for me as I fuck her mouth, then yank her legs apart and sink into her.

And I blow so suddenly and so hard that I smack my palm on the wall to steady myself as cum squirts between my fingers.

“Holy shit.” Dizzy and breathless, I savor the warm water cascading over my body. That was the fastest hand job I’ve had in years.

And that’s the scale of my sexual deprivation lately.

By the time I finish the shower and put a fresh shirt and jeans on, intending to go back to work—because I sleep naked and there is not a chance I can handle that with the wild thing in my bed—I still fantasize about fucking Kat.

The bedroom is dark, the only light the dim glow by the bed.

Kat looks peaceful. Harmless. The spy is unarmed. She sleeps like characters in fairytales—on her back, arms thrown over her head, a perfect pose that would be even better if she were completely naked.

But she is motionless. Even her chest doesn’t rise or fall.

An uneasy feeling turns my stomach.

I approach quietly, studying her body. A respiratory arrest is no joke. It can happen to perfectly healthy people.

I lean over her, bringing my face as close to hers as possible, and watch.

And listen.

And watch.

And listen.

She is breathing, thank god. So quietly, she could pass for a dead person.

Her peaceful face is beautiful. Her lips—full, perfect, so kissable that I want to lick them open.

Stop.

I straighten up and exhale in relief. I should go but I don’t want to. This whole thing is odd. The universe brought her to this island for some strange reason. Maybe to keep me on edge.

I lower myself onto the floor with my back against the bed, take a sip of my drink, and close my eyes.

Today was a little crazy. Wrong timing or circumstances or allergic reaction, and Kat could’ve had serious complications from the bite.

Everyone important in my life is prone to danger.

Mom and little Adam—gone, in a freaky car crash that wiped away what was a picture-perfect Crone family twelve years ago.

Droga—fucked up by an accident and turned into an archenemy for years.

Even Cole who was a buddy for a brief time—shot by the Savages during that attack on Ayana two years ago. Gone.

And now this, Katura Ortiz, who dared to come close if only for a minute—poisoned.

It feels like no one should come close to me in this life. Maybe Dad is right for keeping me at arms' length.

This is my last thought before I sink into darkness.

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KAT

I HAD A STRANGE DREAM.

It was dark, and I heard the shower going. My heart stilled as Archer walked out, padded toward the bed, and bent over. I thought he was going to kiss me. But no—he hovered over me for a moment, then quietly sank onto the floor, his back against the bed. I heard the glass clink softly against the floor. His heavy exhale. Then the room got brighter, the blinds half-open, and I saw Archer’s head tilted against the mattress. Sleeping.

It must be the damn drug that Doc gave me, because when I open my eyes, the room is bright with sunlight and empty.

No Archer.

The asshole made it into my dreams. Great.

My body is unusually languid. The silky sheets caress me between my legs. Guys think their morning hard-ons are exclusive. Well, women wake up rested and have the same arousing tingling in their bodies.

Maybe it’s just me. My self-care is usually a morning thing, and I press my hand over the sheets between my legs, rubbing out the need that burns in me.

The bed smells like Archer. It’s like waking up in his embrace. I close my eyes and slip my hand under the sheet and between my leg.

Soaking wet. How does he do it without being here?

No, bad idea.

I force myself to stop and sit up. It’s quiet, and I slide from under the blanket and swing my feet off the bed.

The sheets are dark-gray—seriously, Archer has an obsession with that color—and so silky that I don’t want to get off the bed. I stretch and throw a glance down my body.

Shit...

What’s with this shirt? It’s lighter in color almost all the way through, but there are dark-red, almost burgundy spots, like tie-dye along the bottom where I touched myself.

Did I ruin it?

And then I pause, gaping at the stone shelf next to the bed—my clothes from yesterday, including my bra and panties, neatly stacked on top of it.

Well, well, if Mr. Chancellor is not efficient. Or his housemaid, or whoever takes care of this place. I know he has a cleaning lady—I’ve seen one when he locked me up here for a night.

Something else makes me huff in surprise—the cuffs with chains fixed to the foot-tall bedposts.

Really?

So, Mr. Chancellor likes it slightly kinky.

Smiling, I shed the shirt and change into my clothes, then give the shirt another suspicious glance and grab it off the bed, intending to wash it later.

The living room is quiet, save for the soft sounds that come from the kitchen. My heart answers with an excited tug as I walk around a stone slab and into the kitchen space.

The smell of croissants and fried bacon wafts into my nostrils, and before I register who is in the kitchen, a chirpy voice stops me in my tracks.

“Good morning, miss.”

The lady is short, in her fifties, wearing a blue apron and a wide smile. “I’m Alma. Breakfast?”

The kitchen island is set up for a romantic breakfast, with gardenias in a vase.

“Is Archer around?”

“Mr. Crone is in the workout room.” There is a workout room? “He said not to wait for him, miss.”

I slide onto the stool at the kitchen island, set the shirt on the chair next to me, and let Alma serve me.

Dang, it feels good to be waited on.

“Do you cook for Archer”—I clear my throat—“Mr. Crone all the time?”

“Not lately, no.” Alma’s smile is permanent on her friendly face. She loads my plate with food and sets it in front of me. “I used to cook breakfast and dinners for him every day,” she explains as she takes a carafe of some green juice from the fridge and pours me a glass. “He used to eat the same thing. Healthy diet, you know.”

She pushes a plate of croissants and a selection of spreads closer to me. Then a bowl of fruit. There is more food than an army can eat.

“This is a healthy diet?” I ask her with a grin, taking a croissant and closing my eyes as it melts in my mouth.

Alma laughs, folding her arms over her big bust. “No. He requested this for you. This is the first time Mr. Crone requested me in a month.”

She smiles, watching me eat as I shove food in my mouth.

“Why?”

She shrugs. “I’m glad he’s back.”

Yeah, from a month-long binge.

I devour the food on my plate. Must be nice to have someone cook for you all the time. Alma starts moving things around the stove, talking about Mr. Crone and how she is excited to cook for him again.

“Next time, miss, I can cook anything you want. If you have any instructions—”

“I’m not—” I say with my mouthful but stop.

I want to tell her this is just a one-off morning and I don’t reside here. But she might think I was a one-night girl, and I don’t want to ruin her impression or whoever she assumes I am.

Archer’s voice in the living room makes me tense up and put down the fork that has shoved most of the plate’s content in my mouth within minutes.

In a moment, he walks in.

Holy shit.

He is in sports shorts, barefoot, bare-chested, his body shiny with sweat, hair a damp mess, and a towel over his shoulder.

I hold back a whimper—why was he not in my bed last night?

He says something into the phone, then cuts the call and smiles at Alma.

She beams. “Mr. Crone, breakfast?”

“No, just a glass of juice. Thank you, Alma.”

She starts fussing like he’s just honored her with the most important task, and I wonder if he’s only polite like this with staff.

His eyes shift to my plate as he walks up to me. “Enjoying breakfast?”

“Yes, thank you.”

I have a hard time keeping his gaze because I want to study his body. A hard time not getting disappointed when he gulps that delicious green juice and says, “I have to jump in the shower and get to work. You should visit Doc to check your vitals and stay home today.”

I’d stay home if you were with me. I bite my tongue.

Just then, he notices the shirt on the chair next to me and steps closer.

“I’ll wash it,” I blurt.

His movements are deliberately slow when he reaches for it, but I snatch it away quickly.

He cocks a brow at me and leans on the back of my chair, bringing his face level with mine.

His stupidly hot lips, dammit—they should’ve been on me last night.

“You seem too fussy about the shirt,” he says in that suggestive drawl of his. “So am I. It was a gift. It’s made out of special fabrics.”

I knew there was a trick, and I tense up, waiting to hear about it.

“It’s made with thermochromic dyes,” he explains.

“Thermo-what?” I ask quietly, not turning my head because then my lips will be just inches from his.

“Dyes that react to temperature change. They are used for a variety of applications, from culinary to military,” he explains slowly, his scent making me dizzy, his warm breath grazing my cheek with every word. The kitchen is suddenly too hot.

“Like a mood ring?”

“Kinda. This was an experimental design. The colors get lighter when the temperature of the body goes up.”

Shit. Makes sense. Maybe he gave it to me to monitor my body temperature in case I had a fever?

Last night it was getting lighter, especially...

“Especially, in high-heat generating areas,” Archer finishes my thought. *Asshole!*

So the whole time yesterday as he was flirting with me and I was getting horny, those colors lightening on the bottom were an indication...

I roll my eyes. “Clever.”

“Yes. Also, it can’t be washed.”

I turn to him abruptly, our lips almost colliding. “Why?”

My heart skips a beat as I meet his smoldering eyes. A sneaky smile on his face. That smile... I'm glad I'm not wearing that shirt right now because it would be bleach-white.

"It's sensitive to moisture," he says quieter, his eyes dropping to my lips, then up to lock his gaze with mine again. "Changes color to a darker one when in contact with moisture. For good."

His mischievous smile widens, and his eyes drop to the shirt that I clench in my hands like my life depends on it. He reaches for it, picking up a corner with his forefinger, but I snatch it away.

"Consider it a gift to me then," I blurt.

"Oh?" He arches a brow. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I like it."

His smile widens as he brings his lips to my ear. "Did you get it wet, Kat?"

I try not to blush as I glance at Alma, snatch my glass of juice, and gulp it, trying to cool down.

"Thanks, Alma," I say, jumping off the stool, the t-shirt clutched in my hand as I turn to look at Archer. "Thank you for breakfast and"—I raise the shirt above my head—"the shirt."

He only smiles devilishly, and God, do I want to kiss him.

"Very. Welcome," he drawls as I turn to leave. "Kat!"

I turn around and pause.

"In case of emergency, I just texted you the pin for my front door."

Hmm. I mean, his cleaning ladies and cooks and security know the pin. Nothing special, right? But why me?

"I thought your villa is almost always open," I say, searching his eyes like I can find a trick behind that too.

"Except at night." There is a flicker of mischief in his eyes. Or am I imagining it?

"Emergency. At night. Got it," I say, not breaking eye contact but walking out until the wall erases him from sight, and the butterflies in my stomach officially start an orgy.

KAT

I STOP AT DR. HODGES' OFFICE FOR ANOTHER CHECKUP.

"It's been over twelve hours," he says, inspecting my wound. "No swelling. The tests from yesterday weren't great, but looks like you are healing like a cat."

I spend the rest of the day cleaning my place, then dial Kai.

The fact that we can talk on the phone now feels unreal. Considering he is on the Eastside.

Callie picks up instead, and we talk for an hour, Kai throwing remarks in the background. Those two seem to be happy like puppies—they deserve it after what Archer and life put them through.

I sink into a slight melancholy after I hang up.

I've never technically had a boyfriend. I learned that whenever I was interested in a guy, my friends turned a cold shoulder, and no guy was ever worth losing friends. Guys came and went. They tended to limit my freedom. They could be super clingy. Relationships came with rules I wasn't fond of. Jealousy was annoying. And occasionally, men lost their minds.

Memories of the night back home when I got my first assault charge rush into my mind as I sit on the patio, cuddled in the wicker chair, and watch the twilight world get darker by the minute, putting the everyday cacophony of tropical birds to sleep.

That prick, Joshua, was exactly that—clingy. The worst part of it—he was a narcissist who couldn't take no for an answer.

And that's how it went down.

My anger.
His fragile ego.
Four guys against one girl. At night. Behind the bar.
Before that, there was that night in Bangkok, when I was barely sixteen.
And that night proved that men can—
Okay, time out.
I exhale, sinking into the darkness of the night.
We don't talk about that night in Bangkok. I try to not even think about it. Because when I do, I can't help but remember the bits and pieces of Olivia's story on the Eastside.
Where do you find nice guys these days?
Kai, alright. He is a charmer. Taken. Good for him.
Marlow? Super-sweet and nice, but too nice for me.
Archer? Emotionally fucked up.
I pick up my phone and reread his messages, trying to dissect every word.
Psycho. Check.
Megalomaniac. Check. Brownie points for being manageable when sober.
Controlling. Check.
Neat-freak. Check.
All the red flags.
And what do I do? Sleep in his bed. Right.
It's Archer on my mind when I go to bed early and wake up at dawn the next day.
I run down to the beach for a swim, then walk to the Center. It's still early enough, and I spend time making myself coffee in the break room and chatting up the surveillance guys.
I already know many of them by name. If I ever need info, I'm sure I can bypass Archer and Marlow and go straight to these guys.
Archer is not in his office, and it makes the day go by faster as I concentrate on files.
I work until dinner, then order food delivery through the Center dispatch.
Maddy is on a night shift at the doctor's office. Marlow is on the Eastside. I don't have any other friends, and the house will be boring.

The good thing about the Center is that it's busy twenty-four-seven. Even the lab—which I haven't yet seen, though it's in the same building—never closes.

The Center feels more like home, always someone stopping by my desk for a chat. It's impossible to tell what time of the day it is, but the lighting is designed to give an impression of a bright day like they do it in casinos. The sound of a rushing creek and birds gives additional stimulation to your brain to keep it awake.

I work for several more hours, going through the endless info of contractors. Nothing suspicious, which is disappointing.

I dial Craig at HR. He is a scrawny guy with a great sense of humor who I see in the break room now and then.

I should find Kolya and apologize for the scene the other day, make it all sweet so I can hang out with him again. Maybe I can lure him to a bar so we can shoot the shit in a more informal atmosphere, and I can fish for info.

Craig sounds confused on the phone and goes quiet for a moment as he searches for Kolya's schedule that I requested.

"Well," he finally says with a tsk, "it looks like his contract with Ayana was terminated."

"When?" I frown, surprised.

"As of yesterday. And it looks like he was sent off the island this morning."

"Anyone else?"

"No, just him. It was Mr. Crone's order."

Mr. Crone.

Oh, I can feel anger rise in me as I thank Craig, hang up, and call Marlow.

There is laughter in the background when he answers. "What's up, Kat?"

"What's up, Katura!" I hear the voice in the background that I recognize as Ty's. I smile and right away feel jealous.

I tried to disregard the Outcasts during my weeks on the Eastside. Turns out, I had more friends there than I have here. The Outcasts felt like a family. The Westside is work.

"I don't want to interrupt the fun evening," I say, annoyed, "but do you know anything about one of the guards I talked to the other day being fired?"

“Yeah. I signed the contract termination.” Marlow sounds distracted.
“Archer’s order. What did you do?”

“Me?”

“I was there when HR handed him the severance package. The guy looked pissed. Said it was because of you, and it was a setup. I asked his buddies. The word among the guards is to stay away from you.”

He snorts in amusement, but I’m not the least entertained by the news.

“Thanks. Enjoy the night,” I snap and hang up, then text Archer right away.

Me: What the hell, Archer? Are you going to fire every guy I talk to on this island?

I tap my foot on the floor as I wait for a reply.

Archer: In a matter of days that would be almost all men at Ayana. So no.

Smartass.

Me: You know who I’m talking about.

No reply comes for ten minutes.

Seriously. This guy tests my patience.

Me: I’d like an explanation.

The next text comes right away.

Archer: I am at my villa. My explanation might take some time.

Why does it sound like an innuendo?

And why in the hell do I have an image of a naked Archer in my mind when I step out of the Center and into the hot humid night and make my way to Cliff Villa?

KAT

I STORM INTO CLIFF VILLA'S EMPTY LIVING ROOM AND HALT.

"Bedroom!" The muffled voice comes from another room.

Bedroom, huh?

I walk in, the sight of the bed I spent a night in jerking me back into the past.

Archer is in his closet, wearing only in his jeans. Picking out a shirt. Gray—shocker. Pulls it on—bummer.

"So, the guard," I say, watching him walk out as I stand with my hands in my pockets.

"I told you not to fraternize with the staff." He walks to another part of the wall, presses the button, and opens a shoe closet. Really? "They get the wrong idea," he says, nonchalantly, from the inside. "Next thing you know, they jeopardize your safety."

He walks out and drops black sneakers onto the floor.

"Oh, please. Like that was even an option."

"I won't repeat it again. Don't play games with others."

"I wasn't playing games. I was researching, Archer."

"Oh, do tell me all about your little research excursion." He pause and stares at me, his gaze knee-weakening. "How the guy's hands were all over you." He is not quite his cold self today. "How a dozen other guys were watching, slathering you with their fantasies."

I cross my arms at my chest. I guess we didn't discuss it properly after the incident. "They were Russian guards. And while I was—what did you call it?—doing an *excursion*, I heard their conversations."

Archer takes a step toward me, his eyes raking down and up my body with intentional slowness.

“And when I slipped out a Russian word,” I continue, my body acutely aware of his approach, “one of the guys said that I might be that girl who some friend of theirs was talking about. So, yeah.”

Archer stops several feet away from me. Like a predator. That’s his signature.

“You don’t care, do you?” I raise my chin defensively, trying to keep my cool though my body is growing hot. “The word around is that I’m to be avoided like poison ivy. I could’ve hung out with those guys and found out more.”

Archer starts stepping into me slowly—one step, two, three—backing me up until my back hits the wall. He is not listening.

“I don’t give a shit what they were talking about.” His gaze is fire. “I watched you on camera, and that guy’s hands were definitely not looking for the proof that you had some Russian in you. *He* was a Russian, trying to get very fucking deep in you in his barracks.”

“And what if he did?”

His stare turns vicious. “Wanna go to the Ashlands and fish for a good lay in the slums, sweetheart? Savages might be a wild ride.”

“Fuck you.”

“I think it’s about time you did.” The corner of his lips hitches in a smile. “If you want to succeed on this island, why not start from the top of the food chain? And guess who’s right there?”

I push him away, but he grabs my hands and presses all his weight on me, pinning me against the wall.

He nears his lips to mine. “Research, kitten? If that’s the kinda research you like, let’s do it here. Want some martial arts training? I’m right here, sweetheart. We can do it naked, too.”

The heat in me spikes like a rocket.

Even our breaths are fighting, so close to each other. Our chests rise and fall, and his rubs against my nipples.

“Feeling snappy, Mr. Chancellor?” I whisper.

I let my body go soft. His pressure loosens too.

Just then, I push into him with all my force, taking him by surprise and backing him up, then duck behind him, swinging his arm upward while twisting him and letting him fall onto the bed face down.

In seconds, I straddle him, holding his arms behind him in a tight grip.

“There, sweetheart,” I say, panting, enjoying the sight of his face in his mattress, “how’s that for training?”

I know my grip is not strong enough. I know his strength—I’ve seen it on the octagon at Carnage. This lock is a joke to him.

And while I focus on holding his wrists, Archer sets one knee against the mattress, then kicks his body upward, making me shoot up and forward as I let go of his wrists and fling my hands upward to cushion my fall.

He is fast—too fast—and in a moment, he grabs me by the waist, flips me like I’m a feather onto my back, and straddles me, pinning my arms above my head.

“Nice try, kitten,” he smiles, breathing heavily, then lowers his face to mine.

His movements are strong but too gentle for a regular fight. I’m not pretending to be stronger than him. But right now, he is not that self-controlled arrogant ass. Bingo!

“You are trouble,” he murmurs with a wicked smile.

And when his lips touch mine, it’s with urgency, opening mine, his tongue licking into my mouth with deep powerful strokes.

Hot tension lashes through my body that suddenly feels liquid. Like his tongue is some magic wand. It is. I swear. This guy is a wizard.

The kiss is deep. I feel like falling. And I don’t want it to end.

I take it with all my pent-up frustration and need. We kiss like we are battling for power. I try to wiggle my hands out of his grip, but Archer only chuckles into my mouth and holds tighter, pressing against me, his hard bulge rubbing between my legs.

He pulls away. “I like your games, kitten.”

“I can tell.” I buck my hips against his hardness, then narrow my eyes on him. I want more. So much more.

“You like to play tough? I like to play hard.”

He kisses me again. He sweeps his tongue against mine, and my body is burning up..

The handcuffs attached to the two bedposts come to mind.

Right, Mr. Chancellor likes restraints.

That’s a no for me. Unless it’s the other way around.

“What’s with the handcuffs?” I ask when he breaks a kiss.

He cocks an eyebrow.

Oh, Archer—so readable at times.

“You like those?” he wonders in a softer voice as he brushes his lips against mine. I go for a kiss, but he pulls back with a chuckle.

Asshole.

I crave his touch. Want more of it. But he seems to be as careful as I am. Something about us clicks perfectly like jigsaw puzzle pieces that break apart right away. It’s the strangest feeling that I can’t figure out.

“Are they decorative or your preference?” I won’t let him go this time. My body is all wired up beneath his.

“Would you like to find out?”

I knew he’d ask that. He likes to answer with an answer. It’s hard to win with him.

“Maybe.” I feel like I’m the one always making the first step. It’s hard to resist the natural instincts when his taut body is pressing against mine. “Will you let me cuff you?”

There’s a flicker of surprise in his eyes. “You are full of tricks, kitten. You already choked me out once.”

There’s that *kitten* again. It sounds so informal, but out of his mouth, it makes me want to purr.

“I can again, if you’re into that,” I whisper.

His gaze hardens, and I slide my gaze up and down his body with intentional slowness.

“Or,” I say, bringing my gaze up to his face, the hungry sparkle in his eyes burning me all the way down to my lower stomach. “Do you like women on top?”

His jaw tightens. “In bed, yes.”

He might be bad in bed despite being gorgeous and confident. I’ve had one before—a beauty with a pushing stick who was done in record time and smiled afterward like he’d blessed me.

Nah, not gonna cut it.

I am a taker, remember? So I nod upward, daring him. “Go ahead.”

His chest rises and falls slowly—too controlled. He is trying to hold back. I buck against his hard bulge, and he lets a smile out to play.

Tremors run through my body. Archer makes me feel too self-aware. He is powerful and confident, looming over me. I want him to snap. I want us to let loose.

“Let me cuff you,” I repeat softly.

His eyes search mine for a bluff.

I'm good at faking. That includes shyness. I bat my eyelashes and purse my lips in feigned modesty.

After a moment, his grip loosens. "Alright, wild thing."

Archer lets go of my hands and shifts to step off the bed, letting me sit up.

Slowly, he reaches behind his back, pulls the shirt over his head, and tosses it onto the floor. I'm surprised he didn't fold it neatly.

His eyes, sparkling with want, don't leave mine.

There, that's the way to get Archer Crone to step out of his organized meticulous self—with the promise of sex. The bastard is as horny as I am.

But thoughts dissipate because his body is sheer perfection. He is sculpted but not buff. Perfect skin and not a single tan line.

He crawls onto the bed and slowly lowers himself on his back, arms spread like a star, his eyes full of curiosity not leaving mine.

"Go for it."

KAT

MY HEART GOES WILD—ARCHER IS LETTING ME DO IT.

I never need fortification for my courage, but right now, I wish I was tipsy.

Slowly, I get on the bed on my hands and knees and crawl toward him.

He's watching me with a hint of a smirk, but his gaze is almost unblinking.

Does he really trust me?

I pick up one of the cuffs, attached to the bedpost by a long chain, and wrap it around his wrist, securing it. My adrenaline spikes in sync with the sound of the cold chain dinging dangerously. Touching Archer sends an electric spark through my body.

Just a wrist. For now.

Keeping his gaze, I shift to the other side of him and secure his other wrist.

Archer won't be able to get away unless there is a trick. But there is not a hint of hesitation on his face, only the intensity in his dark gaze that flickers over my body as I move.

"Lose your clothes," he orders softly.

I can do a little show, sure. I want him to see me. My pussy clenches with need at the thought.

I step back onto the floor and pull my tank off, then slowly tug my shorts down. Underneath is a red bra and matching panties, which I know look great on me.

"All of it," Archer commands.

Too bossy. Considering he is cuffed to the bed and I could walk away.
I will.

But not before I let him get a taste of me so that the next time he wants me we can do this without the nonsensical verbal foreplay.

I reach behind me and unclasp the bra, shrugging my shoulders and letting it fall down to the floor, my breasts with pebbled nipples bare for him.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, studying them.

I love being naked, love my body, and am never shy in front of a guy. A guy of my choosing, that is.

I run my hands along my hair, down to my breasts, along their curves—Archer's eyes following my movements. His hips move just slightly—he is hard as hell.

My hands glide down my hips, thumbs hooking behind my red g-string and tugging it down. It's soaked. And the intensity of Archer's gaze as he finally gets a view of my bare pussy makes me even more turned on.

Slowly, I crawl onto the bed and straddle him.

"You like what you see?" I repeat his words from the day on the beach.

"Yes, kitten."

Kitten?

Cocky. Even cuffed.

He lifts his hips, letting me unzip him and slide his jeans and boxer briefs down his hips, just below his cock that springs out.

This guy is perfect everywhere.

I stare at his cock in utter amazement. Not too long but thick. Perfect. Smooth. I've touched him before but never got a chance to actually see it. This. Artwork.

People have preferences. I really don't care how big a guy is—guys are more concerned in that department than women.

But Archer is perfection, the dusting around his smooth cock—an immaculate landscape.

I want to take him in my mouth. But the desire to tease him is stronger. I pull his jeans farther down and leave them around his thighs—that will do—then glance up to meet his eyes.

There's that satisfied smile on his face—like he knows he looks good. I bring my hand to his cock and give it a slow stroke, his lips parting just slightly as I do.

“I like you naked,” I say softly, stroking his length and circling his tip.

I like seeing his body tense up at my touch. His hips buck just a tiny bit, pushing his cock into my hand. He is leaking precum already, and I smile, smearing it over his tip.

Yeah, he is so ready.

“Impatient, aren’t we?” I drawl, playing with him.

He doesn’t respond, but another stroke and his cock twitches, his hips bucking more.

Straddling him, I move up and bring my pussy to his cock, pushing my hips up to let my clit slide up his length, my other palm pressing onto his abdomen.

He hisses through his teeth, but I don’t look at him. I am fixated on the view of his cock and my pussy reaching its head, my clit meeting his slit and moving back down, leaving a shiny wet trail. I hold his cock at the tip and rub myself back and forth against his length, enjoying the burning sensation where our flesh meets.

I like watching and the slow erotic action, which doesn’t happen often. Men are so simplistic in their needs and usually lack imagination.

This guy is too perfect to let him ruin my fantasies by letting him fuck me in two minutes and be done with it. With him being cuffed, I can take my time. And I would’ve taken even longer—a whole night—if I didn’t need a release so badly.

I keep rubbing myself against his hard length, sinking even lower and pressing tight against his balls.

A grunt escapes him as he lifts his hips off the bed and into me.

“You are too quiet,” I tease him, watching myself grind against him, my hand still wrapped around his cock like I’m holding a joystick.

“Speechless, kitten,” he whispers. I glance up to see him smile at me. “Suck it.”

“Restrained but still demanding,” I murmur with a smile.

I have other plans. This is about *me*, not him. And I moan with pleasure, not hiding it, as I rub myself on his cock, getting it slick.

Archer’s gaze says it all. His head is raised above the pillow as he watches my pussy lick his cock, my hips moving in slow waves. His hungry eyes trail up my body and breasts, then meet my eyes. His are blazing. His beautiful lips are parted. He is not smirking this time—he is fucking me with his eyes.

“Sit on my cock,” he asks softer this time, his voice raspy.

He needs this as much as I do. I rub myself against his cock a couple more times, then bring his tip to my entrance and sink onto it slowly.

Both our mouths part at the sensation. I am so horny I could come in seconds if I did my usual trick.

But I want to see Archer enjoy it. To know that he wants me. Wants more. And maybe if I teach him a lesson, the next time we need a release, he won't be dancing around.

It's just sex. As long as we keep this private, we are good.

I slide almost all the way to his tip, then sink again, closing my eyes at the feeling of him filling me up.

I ride him carefully. For all I know, this might be our only time together. He might be a one-night kinda guy. Hit and run. That would be a pity because his cock is perfect and feels amazing.

I want to find out what he is like in bed. Tonight, I take what I want. But I'd like to know what Mr. Chancellor is like when he lets go with a woman. If that even happens.

I glide my hands up his torso as I ride him slowly, in and out, softly and methodically. I reach his nipples and run my fingers over them, his muscles flexing as I do so.

He doesn't say anything, doesn't make a sound. But his eyes are furnaces, burning me, and his hands slightly pull at the chains.

Even in bed, Archer tries to be in control.

“How does it feel to ride my cock, kitten?” he asks.

“Not bad,” I answer, sinking into him for confirmation.

His eyes sparkle with momentary disappointment.

Did he want praise? Not happening. His arrogance can stay where it is —with him.

“Uncuff me,” he says, his eyes flashing with anticipation. “I'll show you better than not bad. Maybe you haven't had a man fuck you properly.”

I smile and keep riding him, not breaking eye contact, gliding my hands along his V-cut.

Fuck me properly...

Ah, that's the thing with guys. They think they can bang away at you and that makes them the best fuck of your life.

The thing about sex is that it's just sex if there is no connection. An orgasm is a physical reaction that can be achieved with proper friction in a

matter of seconds.

A guy who knows how to handle a woman's body—*that's* a bonus. And when there is chemistry—well, that's a whole different story.

Archer thinks I am grateful for being with him. Well, he can think more about it later when I am done with him.

"Uncuff me," he demands again.

There you go—a guy wanting to fuck me *properly*.

I smile as I start riding him faster, bring my hand between my legs, and rub my clit.

Heat washes over me at the touch. I lean over and kiss him.

God, he is an amazing kisser. Another perfect thing about him. He lifts his head to deepen his kiss, but I pull away, noticing a hint of disappointment cross his face.

"You are a good ride, Archer," I say, teasing his ego, fucking him, and rubbing myself, feeling the climax building up.

"Uncuff me," he repeats impatiently.

Awe, Big Dick is getting restless.

Nah, he needs to learn that men get fucked just like women do.

So I focus on myself. I rub my clit. I ride his cock at the pace that's perfect for *me*. This physical release is a necessity. I wipe away any thoughts and just sink into the sensation.

One minute and I am moaning, pushing myself onto his hardness until the heat inside me bursts into flames, and I ride it out until the orgasm subsides.

When I slow down and open my eyes, Archer stares at me in what seems like awe.

"Don't stop," he whispers in a strained voice, bucking his hips, trying to get me to move.

He didn't come yet, but I have no intention of going on.

I ease him out of me, his cock soaked with my cum, and his expression shifts into a slight confusion.

"That was great," I say on an exhale as I slowly crawl off the bed.

He chuckles. A little frown forms between his brows. "We are not done, kitten."

"Oh, yeah?"

I think he senses what's coming next— a little frown between his beautiful brows deepens—yeah, he does.

I smile, crack my neck, and raise my brows in feigned surprise as I pick up my clothes off the floor. “Oh, I am done for now.”

His expression—priceless!

Imagine if women’s vaginas were closed unless they were turned on and shut again after orgasming like guys’ dicks go soft. Men would be screwed. It truly would be devastating for them, and probably for the survival of the species. The thought is a mindfuck. Men simply don’t understand that women’s sexual behavior very often is a favor to them.

And this beautiful dick starts understanding it too.

“Don’t you fucking dare leave,” Archer warns, anger etching his voice as he yanks at the cuffs.

I wish I could take a picture of him.

He is splayed naked on his bed, save for the jeans pulled down to his thighs. His cock juts up in the air like a sword. Arms spread.

A beautiful starfish.

I flash a cute smile his way.

“Thank you for the invite,” I say sweetly and sashay toward the doorway, clothes in my hand, letting him enjoy the view of my bare ass as I leave.

Except, I have more plans for tonight.

And the first part of it was a success—leaving the beautiful prick hanging. Or, to be exact, hard, naked, and cuffed to his own bed.

ARCHER

ARE YOU KIDDING ME?

I watch Kat disappear out the doorway, and I can't fucking believe this creature. This is the second time she left me in the middle of it.

What.

The.

Fuck!?

My blood boils, concentrating in my cock that's so hard that if I jerk enough times in my restraints, I will come just thinking of Kat's pussy soaking me as she came just a minute ago.

I jerk at the cuffs angrily, but they are top-notch sex apparel made to withstand pressure.

I helplessly throw my head back against the pillow.

Jeans down, dick out—beautiful. I literally just got fucked. In all senses possible.

And Kat left. I swear, I'm gonna locate her, tie her to a palm tree, and fuck her in every hole.

Okay, calm down.

Deep breaths.

The cuffs are secured in a specific way to the short double posts that look like twined rods, but one of them ends just below the top of the mattress. It's done so that there is no fucked up *Gerald's Game* scenario. You can never be too careful.

I curse and stretch as I pull at the right chain and keep yanking it down to bring it to the bottom edge of the pole.

I am so angry that I could kill someone right now. My dick, hard and heavy, bobs in the air as I tug at the chain again and again.

Kat played me. For the second time. Moreover, she left me here cuffed. She didn't know that I'd be able to get away. So she would let me lie like this all night?

"Fuck!" I spit out loud, yanking at the stupid chain and failing.

I am mad because of this circus scenario. Because I almost came when she rubbed herself on me. Because I need to come and she is gone.

Kat is confident in bed, and that's the biggest turn-on in a woman. Not her body but the way she uses it. Confidence is a weapon that not many girls know how to use. Kat sure does.

I fantasized fucking her every night for the last week. Every morning too. During the day. Don't even remind me of the day after the snake accident when I was so turned on I pulled down my jeans in my office and jerked off into the garbage can to the thoughts of her.

I finally yank the chain down and fall back onto the bed, exhaling in relief.

I swear, I will murder Katura Ortiz.

I easily yank down the second chain, then find the key under the mattress to unlock the cuffs and finally tuck my frustrated dick back in my jeans, not bothering to zip them up.

Kat is clean and has the birth control implant as per her medical record. The memory of how her bare pussy felt around my cock makes my dick twitch.

I need to finish this fucking job, even if only with my hand.

But first thing first.

I grab my phone from the nightstand and dial surveillance. The inside resort cameras, except the Diggs and the restaurants, are turned off for privacy, but I swear to God I will switch them all on to track that sneaky little spy at all times.

"I need you to locate someone," I bark into the phone to whoever picked up at the Surveillance room. "A girl left Cliff Villa about twenty minutes ago. I need to know where she is."

Kat's probably hiding. Good. A spy and a coward—what a cocktail.

I flex my hand as I wait for the guy to answer.

"Boss, no one left your house in the last hour."

What?

I frown, but kill the call right away, and frantically pull up my pool camera.

I can't believe it...

I freeze in my spot, and my entire body is ready to explode at her audacity.

Because the wild thing is in my pool.

Naked.

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ARCHER

I CAN'T TAKE MY EYES OFF THE CAMERA VIEW ON MY PHONE.

It's dark, but the pool simmers in blue neon light. And at the far-end of it is Kat.

Naked, she leans with her back against one side of the pool, arms spread like wings.

I zoom in and watch her high tits bob above the water as it laps at her nipples. Just the sight of them makes my dick leak precum again.

And then she raises her eyes at the camera like she fucking *knows* I'm watching.

Slowly, as if she is putting on a show, Kat tilts her head back against the pool edge and closes her eyes.

She is gorgeous. The pool light colors her skin neon blue, making her look like an *Avatar* creature. Her wet hair is slick, and a long tail of it snakes down her front, around her right breast, circling it perfectly.

She is motionless, like a painting, the most erotic image I've seen. Without thinking, I do a screenshot so I can keep that image for myself.

My dick is so hard it's about to break a hole in my briefs, and I rub through the fabric, knowing that there is no chance in hell I will let Kat have her way.

I toss the phone onto the bed and stomp out of the bedroom.

Calm down, I tell myself, crossing the large dim space of my living room.

I slow as I slide the door to the terrace open, cross the deck, and take the steps down to the pool.

Kat hears me and tilts her head down as if challenging me. Always is.

I keep her gaze from the distance as I stop to lose my jeans and briefs, letting my dick free as it greedily points at her.

One more step to the pool, and I dive in.

I haven't felt so angry, pumped with adrenalin, and turned on all at once in forever. If ever. This girl is messing with my hormones big time.

I emerge above the water only several feet away from her. But the mermaid dives in and glides underwater past me. I try to grab her, only grazing her thigh with my fingers.

So, she wants to play...

I dive after her, catching her by the ankle, but she gets away.

We emerge only feet away from each other, her pretty coral lips parted as she pants, her eyes burning me across several feet of blue water.

A little smile starts spreading on her lips, and she dives in again.

I follow, catching her underwater by her thigh, pulling her closer, swiping my hand between her legs. When we both emerge, I yank her toward me and crash my mouth into hers.

The kiss is wet, hot, and demanding. She opens for my tongue, and I wrap my hand around her nape to hold her to me.

She fucked me minutes ago. Yet I feel like I need more of this, kissing—the basics, that doesn't feel so basic at all because I feel like I am fucking her mouth with my tongue.

The kiss is messy and greedy. We are trying to hold on to each other, bobbing above water, but start sinking, and she pushes at my chest and dives underwater.

I'm gonna fucking swallow her.

I follow—her ass, her tits, her pussy, my cock touching her over and over again as my hands grab at her underwater. We reemerge for air, but the mermaid won't give in, going under again.

I want to take her, but she is slippery. Her hands brush against my chest and ass and cock now and then, and I want her hands everywhere. The touches, the water, this wrestling game is hot as hell, and I want to sink my cock into her to get a release. If I don't, I might blow into my own pool. That will be a first. At least, on this island.

Kat wriggles out of my arms, and when we both reemerge, she shoots in the direction of the wide pool steps in one corner.

She won't make it out.

I won't let her.

She crawls on her hands and knees up the steps, halfway out of the water, her sweet ass on full display. But I catch up, yank her by the ankle toward me, flip her, and plant her ass on one of the steps.

On all fours above her, both of us panting, I fist her hair at the back of her head and smash my mouth to hers.

Blood rushes to my dick the minute my tongue sinks into her mouth. Hers is velvety and hot. She kisses like she seduces me to my death. The kiss is so hard it's like a mouth fuck. Any more pre-gaming, and I'll spear her skull with my tongue.

I'm just super horny and didn't come yet and need to as soon as possible unless I want to come right here on her stomach.

Or that's what I tell myself because I've never been turned on like this.

I break the kiss and stare into her eyes that gleam seductively.

I've never been with someone who makes me completely lose my mind.

Right now, I am an animal.

No thoughts.

No rationalizing.

I just want to fuck.

But then I don't want to hurt or disappoint her, and this is the first time I am so aware of what I'm doing.

"You like to mess with me, huh?" I say, the water dripping off my body onto hers.

I drop my gaze to study her, laid out on the blue stone under me, the water droplets glistening like sparkles.

Kat is mesmerizing, her legs open, the sight of her slit making me ache with craving.

"I was playing a siren," she says in a husky voice, "waiting to see if I can lure someone to drown."

My gaze comes up to meet hers, and she deliberately drops hers to slowly study my body above hers.

"Oh, you'll be drowning my cock with your juices in a minute, kitten."

My dick points toward her like a spear, and she holds her gaze on it.

"I've noticed my games have a certain effect on you."

She brings her hand to my cock and gives it a slow stroke, making me hiss.

I kick her legs apart with my knees, then let go of her hair and bring my hand between her legs. My fingers swipe along her slit, making her arch off the tile.

“You left me hanging. I have penalties for that,” I lie, slowly dragging my fingers back and forth along her slick pussy.

“Did you just make that up?” Her voice is cracking. Yeah, she is turned on.

“Yes, especially for you.”

“What are the penalties?” Her eyelids flutter closed, then open as she tries to keep herself together while I play with her pussy.

“You keep fucking with me, you’ll find out.”

“Sounds like I might do just that.”

And, fuck, do I want to shove my cock in her beautiful mouth to make her gag on her own words.

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ARCHER

I CRASH MY MOUTH TO HERS IN A KISS THAT'S ANYTHING BUT GENTLE.

I don't hold back.

I want to eat her up.

The wild thing is a good match, her tongue so demanding that in a moment, we are lapping at each other like animals.

"You are a beautiful spy, kitten," I murmur into her mouth. "You know what happens to spies?" My fingers apply more pressure between her legs. "They get fucked. And you won't leave my place until I prove my point."

I start rubbing her pussy with deliberate slowness, then slide a finger inside her, making her whimper in my mouth, then hold it still.

"Look at you. All worked up and dripping for me. You want more, sweetheart?" I murmur.

She does and starts rolling her hips, fucking my finger as I fuck her mouth with my tongue. Her fingers trace the V of my abs, then wrap around my dick again—fuuuuuck—and she starts pumping it.

I try to hold back but fail. My dick is on fire in her hands. It needs to unload and reboot to handle this foreplay.

I lower my hips to bring my cock to her entrance, and as soon as I slide my finger out, she replaces it with the tip of my cock, and I thrust inside her in one powerful stroke.

She cries out, tearing her mouth off mine.

"Don't hold out on me like the last time," I hiss.

I draw back almost all the way and slam into her again.

"Don't play games with me, kitten."

I do it again, and hot desire spears my cock, my balls aching with the weight of my need for release.

Her gaze on me is scorching when she says, "I wouldn't play games if I didn't have to court you to get laid."

"Court me?" I freeze in surprise and then slam into her again.

She whimpers as I do so, her tits jiggling deliciously. "If you didn't hold back, I wouldn't have to mess with you."

Is she fucking serious? I try to be respectful, and she is telling me I hold back?

I slam into her but don't stop this time. I sink my cock into her again and again, so hard I feel my balls slap against her ass.

"No. Holding. Back. Anymore. Kitten," I say, punctuating every word with a thrust into her. "Is that a deal?"

I grunt. She feels so good.

"I didn't hear you," I grunt, fucking her, and see her eyes roll back.

"Yes," she exhales. "Finally."

Un-fucking-believable.

I haven't met a woman so straightforward and without a need to latch onto me.

I kiss her neck, biting her lightly, then her shoulder, then catch her nipple into my mouth and suck on it. Her skin is wet and cool under my tongue, the texture of her nipple so erotic it makes little flames swirl through my cock that is ready to explode.

I can't stop. I lower my body onto her and pump into her pussy like there is no tomorrow.

Her hands slide into my wet hair, pushing my face closer to her tits, and as I fuck her, I lick her nipple, then her breast, kissing and biting it, then do the same to the other.

Her body is as addictive as her pussy. Something about it makes me want to eat her up.

In a moment, Kat starts pumping her hips up, her ass lifting off the ground.

Everything around blurs, leaving just the sensations. My cock slamming into her. The texture of her breasts that I mouth like I want to suck the life out of them. The sounds of our bodies slapping together and the water lapping at our feet.

Neither of us are holding back this time. All the pent-up anger and want have us rubbing against each other so feverishly that I wonder for a second if her back is scraping against the steps. Her wild hair is splayed like a halo around her head. She is so beautiful this very moment that she looks like a greek goddess, her gaze shooting hot arrows at me through half-hooded eyes.

I squeeze one breast in my hand and suck one of her nipples between my teeth. Kat cries out, again and again, arching her back. Her ass lifts off the ground, hips bucking at my cock with every thrust—the shameless girl that she is—as I pound into her. She moans loudly—a loud beautiful unhinged sound of her orgasm that sends me over the edge.

I can't help a low groan as I pull my cock out and spurt my cum all over her bare pussy, then shove myself back inside her and pump forcefully a couple more times, draining everything I have and making her whimper.

I swear, my brain explodes this time. As if it's synced with my cock that never shot cum so powerfully. I went from zero to insane in less than twenty minutes.

I slow but don't completely stop. When I keep going like this, I can stay hard. And I want to fuck this girl for hours.

"Oh, fuck," Kat whispers as she goes lax under me.

"That's right, kitten," I pant into her ear, rolling my hips. "You almost woke up the parrots with your cries. That's what I like to hear."

I know myself and my needy dick. Just a little time to recharge, and it's getting hard again.

I give Kat's earlobe a lick with my tongue and murmur, "This won't be nearly enough, will it?" We both know it.

Thrusting my cock into her really slow, I rise on my elbows and watch her as she lies beneath me, her gleaming eyes hooded.

"Ready for part two, kitten?"

Her eyes widen with a flicker of surprise.

I smile, pulling out and rising to my knees, and my hand wraps around my cock, slick with her cum, pumping it.

Once.

Twice.

Giving her a little show.

Then I bend to wrap my arm around her waist, pull her up, flip her onto her all fours—a little too forcefully—and pull her up to stand on her knees,

her back flush against my chest.

“One more, kitten,” I murmur into her hair, holding her with my arm around her waist.

I kick her knees wider with mine, bring my cock to her entrance, and sheathe inside her from behind.

She mewls.

“Too much, kitten?” I chuckle into her ear, thrusting into her slowly but so deeply I almost lift her off the ground with my hips.

“Never,” she breathes and bucks her delicious ass at my cock.

That ass...

I want to fuck it.

I will.

Just the sight of it makes me dizzy, my groin rubbing against the split of it.

I bring my hand to her chin and turn it to capture her lips in a kiss. I dominate it. I want to eat her alive, feed her my cock and let those lips suck on it just like she greedily latches onto my mouth right now.

Her hands go up above her head and tangle in my hair, pulling it.

I fuck Kat slower this time, palming her tits that fit perfectly into my hands. Dark pleasure surges through me, making my balls tighten.

I want to talk dirty to her.

I want her to talk back.

I want to have my way, fuck her in all the holes I can find.

But this is my first taste of her. And I know it won't be the last one. Because no girl ever unhinged me like this.

I slide my hand down her front and between her legs. My cock is pumping into her with a calculated rhythm, her warm wet pussy squeezing it tightly. I can go at it as long as needed for her to come again.

My fingers reach her plump clit, and the feel of it makes me groan like it's a button that's connected to my cock.

She pulls her mouth away from mine and opens her legs wider for me, giving me better access.

I love how she adjusts her body without an ounce of shame to receive pleasure. I've pleased her once before. She pretended like she didn't come. Knowing how fast she can bring herself to a peak, I'm pretty sure she lied.

“A little liar,” I murmur. “That time during the escort party, I know you came on my fingers.”

A chuckle comes out of her pretty mouth, and I pull out and thrust into her slower, but deeper, holding her up on my cock. “Next time”—I pull out and do it again —“I will edge you until you learn not to mess with my head.”

“Next time?” she murmurs and right away whimpers as I apply more pressure to her clit.

Yeah, kitten. Next time. And the one after that. And one more.

I rub her faster. Her moans are like a song. I’ll make her sing an aria for me next time.

“Archer,” she exhales barely audibly.

I’m pretty sure she didn’t mean to say my name. But I love it. I drive harder into her and work her pussy with my fingers, concentrating on her little gasps and whimpers until the pool area echoes with her repeated cries. She throws her head back against my shoulder, and her entire body shudders in orgasm.

“Good girl,” I grunt, burying my face in her warm neck as I pump into her pussy until I blow into her and can’t fucking stop, shoving in again and again, the dark pleasure rolling with such intensity that my thighs lock.

I finally stop—*holy fuck*—wanting to say something snarky but unable to calm my breath.

For a moment, my chest rubs against her back as I breathe hard, my arms wrapped around her and holding her tight against me. Both of us are on our knees, our feet in the water. It feels like an embrace, but it’s anything but. We are here for sex. And we just need this moment to recuperate.

Except, her body feels like it was made to mold with mine. I am used to skinny girls. She has more curves, and it feels... perfect.

No.

Not gonna go there.

I let go of Kat, back away into the water, and fall backward, going under for several seconds to wash off my own cum and cool the fuck down.

When I emerge, Kat sits on the steps, leaning back on her hands, her legs slightly apart, giving me a perfect view.

Fuck me.

She does that on purpose, shameless spy.

I swim to the edge of the pool, pull myself up on my arms, and get out of the water.

Dripping, I stand there smoothing my hair to give her a full view of what she is in for. The cool water tingles against my skin, and my cock is half-hard but growing as Kat watches me—he is like a compass that always points in her direction.

Holding her gaze, I walk past her.

“If you can handle more of me, I’ll be inside,” I say, challenging her, and walk naked back into the cool dim villa.

A taker, like me—she’ll come.

I smirk as I make myself a drink and pad naked to the bedroom.

The rules of not fucking those who work for me are off for now. I’m sure we’ll be done when we both get enough.

My phone rings on the bed where I left it, and I pick up the Surveillance Center call.

“Boss, you were asking earlier. The girl just left your villa through the back entrance,” the guy says.

The world spins for just a fraction of a second.

When?

I stab the end call button and take a large gulp of cognac, swallowing my bitterness.

So, she snuck out. She can’t handle me. Or won’t.

In these several seconds, my mood plunges down like the water drains out of a sink.

I smirk to myself, trying to kill bitterness with more bitterness.

Except it doesn’t work. I can’t get the image of her body out of my mind and take another gulp to kill the disappointment that simmers inside, my cock missing her already.

I want more of Kat, but she ran away.

There’s a pattern—she comes and goes.

That just means I have to push harder.

KAT

I AM IN TROUBLE.

On a subconscious level, I think I knew it the moment I laid eyes on Archer's photo in the file before I came to Zion.

It doesn't help that he is my boss now.

Going through security guards' files is hard enough. But it would be easier if I didn't have an unsolicited picture of his perfect dick pop in my mind every other minute.

So, the pool. I got fucked. Hard. Deliciously. It was a one-off.

Last night was perfect.

He was perfect.

It's early morning, and I am sitting at the Center with my mind full of porn images and my pussy wet for my boss.

Fantastic.

I'm sure one particular image will be engrained in my mind forever—naked Archer standing on the edge of the pool, water dripping down his Adonis body, the pool light enveloping him in neon blue as he smoothes his wet hair.

Scandalously irresistible.

I'm so screwed.

His voice enters the office hall before *he* does.

Every cell in my body responds to that low curt tone of his, so different from the way he talked to me last night.

I try to focus on work. Pretty sure if I could burn with my eyes, I would've set my desk on fire.

So, no, I fail at focusing. My body is tense from that strange awareness I have in Archer's presence, even when I don't see him.

I flick my eyes in the direction of his office, and there he is. Behind his desk. Cellphone pressed to his ear. Staring directly at me through the glass as he talks.

This job is turning into hell.

Next time.

His words were a promise. Right? Because that's the reason I'm wearing a new tennis-style dress.

Look at you, I taunt myself. Needy for a lay. Or a guy. This one particular guy.

Here is the thing about skirts and dresses. Women wear them on dates not because they look more feminine and seductive. Nah. Lies. It's because when things come to foreplay or any action, it's easier for a guy to reach under a skirt. If it comes to the bedroom, it's much sexier to take off a skirt than to fumble with jeans. Or figure out what to take off first—socks or pants. Or—if you straddle the guy—jeans are just a barrier. I've done it before. Skirts—a hundred percent, logistics and all.

And that's what I'm wearing, telling myself it's because I look cute, but in reality—I am looking for another chance.

I left Archer's villa last night just to mess with his ego. But as soon as I got to my place, I regretted it. I could've gotten more. *Wanted* more. I'm still slightly sore from being filled with him.

Jesus.

I exhale loudly through my puffed lips. This is ridiculous.

After two hours of struggling not to look in Archer's direction, I pick up my phone and shoot Marlow a text.

Me: I want to take a look at the security booths map. Possible? Have time for me?

I really need to get out of here.

A minute goes by, and my phone dings, but...

Archer: Sure.

I frown.

Me: Pardon me?

Archer: Marlow said you had questions about the security. I have a minute. My office.

You traitor, Marlow!

The whole point was to get out of the office where Archer—I raise my eyes, and sure enough—watches me like he’s trying to hypnotize me.

It works.

I get up and make my way to his office.

“What was the question?” Archer drops his phone on the desk and leans back in his office chair, zeroing his stare on me with a brief flicker to my bare legs.

Memories from the pool escapade last night assault my already weak brain. I am hot and cold at the same time. My face is on fire. Every muscle is tense just standing in front of him.

“I was hoping to talk to Marlow. He has all the info.”

Archer’s gaze is unblinking like that of a python. “Tell me what it is. I’ll tell you what I can do.”

“Well... I’d like to know which parts of the island are under surveillance and which are not. Also, how the guards’ schedules are made, whether their positions are permanent, or they get shifted around. Also, I’d like to know who gets to patrol the port and Port Mrei itself.”

“A handful, huh?”

Is he challenging me?

“Archer, I’d appreciate it if your words didn’t drip with sarcasm when we talked about work. I’m not leading an army. I’m doing research.”

“Duly noted. You have an interesting technique.”

“Just because it’s not your way doesn’t mean it can’t work.”

“Easy.” His expression softens, and he blinks away, nodding toward the computer. “Come here.”

I walk around the desk as he clicks something on the screen, then pats his leg. “Take a seat.”

Really?

My face starts burning. One night, and he is bringing this—our mess or whatever is happening between us—to work.

“Seriously?” I snap. “We gonna do this in front of everyone?”

“No. You are right.” He feigns disappointment. “Corlo, close the blinds. Lock the door.”

A grin lights up his face as he pats his leg again.

KAT

THE BLINDS START SLIDING DOWN WITH A WHISPER, CLOSING SHUT OVER THE full height of the window.

Archer taps his fingers against his thigh. "Take a seat."

If I were smarter around this guy, I would've told him to fuck off.

"This is very obvious," I say, trying to resist the temptation.

"What exactly? That you shouldn't have left last night because you regretted it afterward?"

The fucker is reading my thoughts.

"Closed windows and locked doors, Archer."

"I do a lot of business behind locked doors. You are overthinking." He pats his thigh again, his eyes locked with mine. "We agreed to not hold back."

True. "But not at work." I'm still trying.

"Consider this a lunch break. Are you shy?" he dares me, a sly smile on his lips.

Oh, you didn't just...

I take three lazy steps toward him, then turn and gracefully lower myself onto his lap.

Something happens, and the chair drops a foot lower, sending me rocking back against Archer. My butt slides between his legs, and his hands land on my hips.

"Better," he murmurs, and my body gets shivers from the heat in his voice. "Press on that small window in the corner of the screen."

I laugh through my nose, hesitating, suddenly too nervous though it's unlike me.

Archer leans over, murmuring in my ear, "Did you want to see the maps or not?"

"Sure." I reach for the mouse and click where he instructed.

The map that opens up is almost like the one Dad and Uncle showed me back home, but it's sprinkled with dots.

I know Archer is not sharing any sensitive info. Everyone knows the island has cameras everywhere. I just want to have a better idea of where they are and how security guards rotate.

"Now, zoom in on Ayana," Archer orders softly.

He shifts, widening his legs, and his hands slide lower down my thighs to where the hem of my dress meets my skin.

"We can't do this at work," I murmur, not looking at him, and hold my breath because I want his touch more than anything.

"No, we can't," Archer agrees. But his fingers continue drawing along my dress's hemline, making my skin tingle at the touch.

"Then what are you doing?"

"Trying to prove us both wrong."

Bastard.

"Now pay attention." He shifts a little, leaning into me. "The red dots are deactivated cameras. Green ones—active," he explains in a measured monotonous voice.

Slowly, both his hands start sliding up my thighs, carrying the hem of the skirt with them.

I clear my throat and shift in my seat. So does he. I can feel his hardness press against my lower back. This is... Yeah... Distracting.

"There are no active cameras inside Ayana except the restaurants and the Diggs." Archer's voice is somehow closer, right in my ear. His speech is slow as he talks. And his hands don't stop moving, playing with the hem, all the while sliding up. "But the perimeter of it is secured. Additional cameras are all along the beach line."

His hands slide to the insides of my thighs, touching the bare skin, then up, pushing my legs to open wider.

I am already wet. He'll know if he touches me—

"Satisfied?" he whispers in my ear. "About Ayana? Moving on." One of his fingers hooks under my panties and moves them aside, then pauses.

“Going east,” his whisper grazes my neck.

I can’t do this. His finger holds my panties to the side. Cool air grazes my wet exposed pussy. It’s so distracting that I want to take the computer mouse and rub myself with it.

“You need to focus, Kat,” Archer whispers. “Move the map to the east. Zoom in.”

I *do* try to focus and drag the cursor across the screen, shifting the map east.

His free hand hooks under my knee.

“Wider,” he murmurs and pulls my leg up, shifting it over his lap and opening me wide.

The smooth movement of this fingers sends shivers down my spine.

I lick my lips, having trouble keeping my eyes on the screen, and drop my left hand on Archer’s knee for leverage.

There are red and green dots all over the Eastside on the screen. I didn’t realize there were *that* many cameras surveilling the Outcasts. But the info is hard to process because Archer’s fingers stroke the skin at the junction of my thighs, and I can feel myself leak like a freaking cat in heat.

“Eastside, the wild area,” Archer explains. “But you already know that, kitten.”

My lower belly clenches at the word. I love when he calls me that, though I’ll never admit it to him.

His fingers stroke along my center, just barely applying pressure and grazing my clit. I hold back a whimper. He does it again, and my legs instinctively open a little wider as I lean back into him.

This is torture, but so erotic that the map in front of me starts to blur.

“We take care of the Eastside even though it doesn’t look that way,” he says and plants a little kiss on my neck as his hand applies more pressure, sliding down my slit, then up.

I exhale heavily and close my eyes, my body simmering at his touch.

“You can’t see with your eyes closed, kitten,” Archer murmurs, his soft chuckle grazing my neck.

I open my eyes, but my brain is too mushy right now. My hand squeezes his knee as he keeps sliding his fingers up and down between my legs, the moisture so abundant that I’m afraid I’ll make a puddle on his office chair.

“Next, the Ashlands.” His hand dips between my legs, sliding back, and I gasp with a whimper that’s too obvious. “It’s an unknown territory.”

There's satisfaction in his drawl. "We don't really pay attention to it, though we should. There are blind spots there." His fingers bring the moisture all the way down, to my back entrance, and I clench my teeth, trying not to moan.

"Next."

I shift the map to Port Mrei, the town up north. My hand grips the mouse tightly as I try to keep my composure while his fingers rub me so good that my body melts in the chair, my back pushing against his chest. I want to open my legs as wide as I can. And then I want him inside me.

"The town," Archer says, his voice strained.

He is turned on, the bulge pressing into my lower back hard as iron. I shift my hand from his knee to his thigh, applying pressure, and feel him groan.

"The streets and the beach are the main focus." His fingers slide up my slit. "The downtown has several cameras." He rubs my clit, making me shudder in pleasure. "And last but not least—the docks and the port of entry."

His two digits slide into my folds and inside me.

I bite back a moan.

"Did you understand the map, kitten?" he whispers, his fingers slowly thrusting inside me. The heel of his palm rubs against my clit, and I roll my hips, grinding myself onto it.

My body is boneless.

I close my eyes again.

This feels so good that I won't last long.

I open my eyes and turn my head, bringing my lips an inch from Archer's.

He licks into the seam of my mouth, teasing, then pulls back, smiling.

The sound of the desk phone ringing is so unexpected that I almost jump up. But Archer holds me in place, his fingers still inside me.

"Pass me the receiver," he says.

I bend to pick it up as he still cups me between my legs.

His hand holding my panties aside lets go and grabs the receiver. "Yes," he blurts into the phone and starts fucking me with his fingers as I sag against his chest.

"No, not right now," he snaps into the phone as he pumps into me faster, deeper with every thrust, and I push against his palm, sliding lower in the

chair.

“I have my hands full right now,” he says.

I feel the climax coming, my skirt up to my hips, my bare pussy on display.

“No. Tell him later!” he blurts out, frustrated, and shoves his fingers deeper inside me, making me bite my lip so that I don’t scream.

“Alright, give me a minute.” I feel his mouth on my ear. “I want you to come, kitten. Now. Rub your pussy while I finger you.” He keeps pumping harder. “No, nothing,” he blurts into the phone. “Got distracted...”

I drop the mouse that I’ve been holding like it’s an anchor and start rubbing myself while Archer keeps saying something into the phone that I don’t pay attention to anymore.

I squirm in my seat, my legs shamelessly wide, one over his thigh, dangling on the side. He slides his fingers out just for a moment to push my skirt up all the way to my waist. It gives him a view of my panties, skewed to the side, and my pussy with my fingers on it.

The sight starts a blaze in my body. And when he slides his fingers inside me again, in seconds, I explode, tensing against Archer’s chest, then snap my legs close, trapping his hand between my thighs.

Archer tosses the receiver onto the desk. His fingers stroke my cheek as I try to calm down. “I like when you don’t hold back, kitten. I would love to show you more, but I’m afraid we have to postpone this.”

I want more. So much more. All the things I want to do with him.

This guy is unbelievable.

I slowly rise on weak legs, fix my skirt, and turn to meet Archer’s eyes.

He is up, too, his hand reaching for mine.

“Next time,”—he presses my hand to his hard bulge—“I hope you can give me some insights about your research.”

Yes!

His smiling gaze roams my flushed face. I lick my dry lips but hold back the words.

I start to walk away when he calls my name, making me turn. His face lights up with that familiar shit-grin that I know means something snappy is about to come out of his mouth.

He approaches slowly. “There is a wet spot on the back of your dress. You should probably change. I noticed you like to get things wet.” He

smiles, then—Motherfucker!—taps my nose with his forefinger and adds, “Kitten.”

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ARCHER

THE CALL TO THE LAB WAS UNTIMELY AND INFURIATED ME WHEN I FOUND out it was all for nothing.

By then, my kitten ran off, probably to change her dress, and my dick is silently hissing at me in frustration.

What do I do?

I go to the surveillance office, tell one of the guys to take a break, and check out the morning footage from Ayana beach.

Kat said she swims every morning. And here she is, on one of the cameras, in the distance, shedding clothes as she walks across the sandy patch, then runs into the water and dives in.

I can watch her forever.

My phone beeps.

Maddy: Bo is awake. Wondered if you want to come over and see him.

There's always something.

The text hits me with a wave of unease.

Maddy is twenty-three. Bradford College of New Jersey. Unfinished Master's of Medicine. Parents—deceased. No surviving siblings.

We need people like her. Soft-spoken, kind, quiet. Not a party-head. She's been tight with Bo since we arrived at Zion for Spring Break.

Bo is a different story. He was the general manager of Ayana. In his thirties, he was slick, Armani suit, Movado watch and all that. Polite speech, immaculate manners, and thick dreadlocks neatly tied in the back that made him approachable and a hit among the staff.

We started on the wrong foot right away. To be exact, the first night the master pool was trashed and Qi Shan was running around naked, harassing the young maids.

Bo's voice was sharp and cold the next day when he said, "Mr. Crone, I understand that your father owns the resort, but I have a responsibility to the staff."

I was drunk and snapped at him. Offered money, I think. Laughed. I wasn't responsible for anyone but myself. This was our vacation, and if it destroyed the resort, we would've paid for it.

No surprise, Bo and I didn't click for the next several days.

So when the nuclear attacks happened and that very night, Ayana was attacked by Savages and shit went down, leaving us with the dead bodies of our friends, Bo and many others blamed me.

That's why, as I park my bike at Doc's office, I feel unease crawl down my spine—it was my fault Bo was shot by one of the guards and almost died two weeks ago.

Doc is at the receptionist's desk when I walk in.

"Looking good," he says, studying me up and down like he does an x-ray of me with his eyes. "Looks like you are eating these days?"

The fact that he talks to me like I'm a kid is endearing, considering he is the only person who inquires about my health. Unlike my dad.

Maddy is in Bo's room when I walk in. She smiles softly—"Hey, Archer"—always does, like I didn't banish her to the Eastside for two years.

I nod and shift my eyes to Bo, who looks at me calmly, his eyes slightly drooping, IVs snaking from his arms. His dreadlocks are in stark contrast with the blue hospital bed, his sculpted body almost too small for it.

"I'll let you two talk," says Maddy.

"Stay, Maddy," I argue calmly. "We should all talk together."

There are no secrets here. I'm not blackmailing. Bo, Maddy, and Droga have all the leverage on the Eastside. It's about time I gave them all an option to go or stay—whatever they choose.

I grab a chair and pull it up to Bo's bed and take a seat, leaning with my elbows on my knees.

"How are you?"

It's always hard to make peace after playing enemies for years. If I were drunk, I would've been cocky. But I haven't had a drink today. Yet. I limit myself to a couple a day. Usually at night. That's much less than what I am

used to in the last month, and the need for a fix makes my skin crawl the first half of the day.

Addiction is a bitch. I am a scientist. I know how it works. But what helps is microdosing. Tiny amounts of LSD that I take during the day curb the craving for other drugs and booze. Every day it gets easier.

Bo studies me through his sleepy eyes. “Not looking that great, Archer. Demons chase you at night?”

“Looks like they caught up with *you*,” I say without bitterness. “I am sorry for what happened to you, Bo. No one was supposed to use firearms that night.”

He nods. “Thank you for the help.”

He means Doc, the nurses, and treatment. Are you supposed to thank the person who almost got you killed and got you a doctor afterward?

Maddy speaks from across the room. “What are your plans for the Eastside, Archer? Can we please talk about it?”

Thank you, Maddy.

Only she could openly entice a conversation after two years of a standoff.

“Do you have surviving family back on the mainland?” I ask her, knowing the answer.

“No,” she says barely audibly.

“You, Bo?” I turn to him. “You are from the Dominican, aren’t you?”

He nods. “Yes, some family. Dominican is safe, except for radiation and the lockdown obviously.”

“Would you like to go back?” He doesn’t say a word, just stares at me. “If there was a means of transportation and clearance. Would you like that?”

I push back any emotions that try to seep through—mostly guilt and unease. I want to be done with this as quickly as possible.

“I spent the last five years on Ayana,” he finally says. “I wouldn’t have left Ayana if it weren’t for the circumstances two years ago.”

“Got it,” I cut him off. “So here is the plan. And it will only work if you, Maddy, and Droga make it work. Because obviously, I am the wrong person to try to approach the Eastsiders.”

I take a deep breath and exhale, raising my eyes at Bo.

“Maddy has a phone now.” I turn to her. “I hope you had a chance to talk to Droga.” She nods. I turn back to Bo. “Hurricane season is

approaching. As per historical data, a bad hit is way overdue. If it's major this year, it will take out the east side of Zion. Probably do some damage on Ayana, and definitely Port Mrei. I need to relocate the Eastside. They won't be safe anywhere but Ayana. But Ayana is an enemy. Their pride will go on strike."

We sit quietly for a moment, the only sound the beeping of Bo's heart monitor.

I thought this would be hard, but it's actually liberating to let things go. When I don't have to worry about the safety of the Eastside, I can get more shit done in Gen-Alpha. This is pure business.

"So what I want—" I pause, then correct myself—"would like is to relocate to Eastsiders to Ayana—I will provide accommodation and everything else. I will put them in touch with the mainland. I know I banned their access to any communication, and that was harsh. So let's correct that. Most of them have substantial accounts, funds, and surviving relatives. Once they sort out their business on the mainland, they will have a choice of whether they want to stay here. If they want to leave, I will provide the transportation and my father will ensure the clearance from the mainland."

Bo's eyes shift to Maddy. I look at my hands, fingers entwined in front of me.

"If they want to stay," I continue, keeping my voice monotonous, "I will put them in touch with HR. They won't have to deal with me—there are plenty of people in management these days. This all needs to be done within a month, smoothly and with no fighting. I don't have time for this nonsense anymore. And I am not taking responsibility for whatever happens to them during the hurricane season."

I get up right away.

Maddy studies me with a soft smile that's more polite than really genuine, but it doesn't matter.

"I'll talk to Kai again," she says softly.

God, this girl. I never really liked people, per se. But if I had a sister, I would've liked her to be like Maddy—understanding.

Dark wavy hair gathered loosely at the back, pretty face, no makeup, simple Ayana clothes...

"Why are you still wearing Ayana apparel?" I ask, studying it. "Didn't you get to HR yet?"

Her face lights up with a smile. “I did. Thank you. It’s taking time. And I’m fine with this, really. Thank you.”

Always thankful. Always grateful. She reminds me of war nurses in the old movies—the type of person who would work day and night saving soldiers and sacrificing her own life for someone else.

“Are you working with Doc? Is that alright?” I ask more out of politeness than interest.

“Yes. It’s... It’s my habitat.” She laughs. Even her laughter is soothing. It could probably heal wounds.

“Alright.” I turn to Bo. “Think about what I offered. There is really no choice for the Eastsiders to stay there. But they can choose what happens next. It’s important. I’m done with this shitshow and need to set things straight.”

Maddy flickers a glance at Bo, but I’m already turning toward the door.

“Archer,” Maddy stops me. “Kai said something about some kid from Port Mrei.”

“Shit,” I curse, realizing I completely forgot about his request. “I’ll get someone on it. Thanks, Maddy.”

But before I leave, I turn to Bo, who seems to never stop watching me. “If you decide to stay in Ayana, I would like you to take your old job back.”

With that, I leave.

Handling Ayana now is different from two years ago. It’s a bigger job. More responsibilities. And I just offered it to Bo. It’s an olive branch, and we both know it. It took me a while and two crazy years of world lockdown and being cooped up on this island to realize that it’s easier to make enemies than friends but much more productive to choose powerful people to be at your side than to exile them.

I exhale with a full chest when I walk out to the reception hall.

“How is he?” Doc asks though he knows it better than me.

I nod. “Listen, I would like to add more personnel to this facility.”

Again—that list of agendas that never ends.

“Plus we’re expecting two dozen new arrivals who haven’t had medical checkup for two years. Do you have time to talk this week?”

Doc nods with a smile. “It’s been way overdue, yes.”

“Let’s do dinner?” I offer.

I’ve only had dinner with him once two years ago when he and his wife came to Zion.

“How about you tell me when you have time, Archer, and I’ll ask Susan to cook something special.”

“That would be nice.”

“Good, good.” Doc’s smile widens.

I just got invited to a family dinner. And as I leave the building, my chest tightens with unfamiliar warmth.

Because most of us forgot what it feels like to have a family.

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ARCHER

I CALL SLATE RIGHT AWAY AND TELL HIM TO TAKE SEVERAL GUYS TO PORT Mrei and locate the kid Droga was talking about.

“Be nice, yeah?” I say. “He is a guest. Tell him that the tattooed gentleman from Ayana and his lady want to talk to him. Bring him to the side docks at Ayana and call me when you get there.”

A guest.

Jesus. If I could be any nicer to people—some homeless kid at that—I would’ve thrown up in my mouth in amusement at myself.

I pour myself a drink. It’s afternoon. And I savor the first sip as I sit on the couch and stare at the ceiling.

I’m not doing this for the kid but for Droga. It will give me a chance to meet with him.

It’s only half an hour and not even the full drink down when Slate calls again, informing me they are at the docks.

My heart leaps in anticipation as I leave the villa, and three minutes later park my bike at the south docks.

The kid is...well, a kid.

He gives me a hostile look that changes to curiosity as I walk up to him and study him with amusement.

He’s barefoot, in torn shorts and a stained shirt several sizes too big. Smelly, too. I wonder how many kids like him live on the streets.

“Sonny Little,” he says businesslike and stretches his hand to me for a shake.

I can't help but smile, hearing the guards' sneers, and shake his little hand, wondering where it's been and how many days—weeks—since it's been washed.

"Who came up with the name?" I ask him as I pass Slate an adult life jacket that he puts on the kid against his struggle. He is like a naughty puppy, I swear. Seeing a kid on Ayana is weird to say the least.

"Guys on th' street," he says proudly like he is part of some gang.

I'm not taking Slate with me. It's one of the few times I leave Ayana without security.

The kid's eyes light up with excitement when I steer the boat into the deep waters and fire up the engine. With his chin-length tangled hair blowing in the wind, he looks like a baby bird peeking out of a nest, his head too small over the adult-size life jacket.

There's no fear in his eyes that study me openly, stuffing his mouth with chips that Slate must've gotten to bribe him.

"You, like, the big boss or somethin'?" he asks, squinting at me in the sun and slightly sliding back and forth on the bench as I steer the boat east. His speech is awful—those swollen words, the street lingo.

I nod and throttle down so he is more comfortable.

"And the other guy? Who talk' to me a week ago? Inked to here." He raises a hand to his neck.

Droga.

"My friend," I say. I wish we still were.

He turns and studies the island, wide-eyed, forgetting the chips for the next half an hour. His world has just expanded tenfold. He's probably never left Port Mrei before.

I slow down as we round the island, approaching the Eastside, then throttle down.

The boat goes slow, but my heart pumps like crazy as I veer among the rocks underwater—I've learned the way to get to the beach by heart, studying the cameras for the last two years.

There are people on the beach. They stop, shielding their eyes as they squint at my boat. Someone starts running toward the village.

My heartbeat spikes even higher, thudding in my head.

I idle the boat toward the broken pier and kill the engine but don't move.

The kid looks up at me. "Wha' we waiting for?"

I scan the beach, recognizing the figures against the jungle in the background—Zach, Ty, Owen, Ya-Ya. They don't move as if waiting for me to draw an AK-47.

"For the green light," I say, then realize that the kid doesn't know what that means.

Did he ever watch TV before the Change?

It's crazy to think that children are growing up not knowing what it was like before. The normal.

More people walk out onto the beach, and then I see *them*, Droga and Callie, walking toward the water.

Callie stays behind while Droga's smiling gaze is on Sonny Little as he approaches the docks.

"Hey, little fella," he shouts cheerfully before he even reaches the boat, and the kid waves his hand so furiously that his entire body shakes, a grin on his face.

Droga is barefoot and only in his board shorts. It's the most undressed I've seen him since the accident. I hold my breath—the amount of tattooed skin is overwhelming, from his ankles up to his neck.

They cover burn scars.

Fuck...

That awful scream that pierces the air...

His figure moving like a string puppet against the bright orange of the bonfire...

Shouts...

Cries...

The frantic lights of the ambulance...

I can only imagine the pain of having tattoos done over scars.

I am lost just for a moment. But when I raise my eyes at Droga, whose bare feet thud against the wooden pier as he approaches, his eyes are on me.

There is no judgment. Just a nod and a quiet, "Hey," as his eyes shift to the kid and he helps him out of the boat.

My heart does this strange thing where it goes quiet, then starts pumping fast, then quiet again.

"Welcome to the Eastside," Droga says with a smile to the little guy, then looks at me, "Give me a sec," and leads the kid to the beach.

The pair is a strange sight—a tall muscled guy covered in ink and a little kid in an oversized lifejacket. Seeing kids around is just plain weird.

I watch them as the rest of the beach watches *me*.

They hate me.

Whatever.

Not a single one of them dared to cross to the Westside in the last two years and try to talk to me.

Droga comes back to the boat, his movements easy like we didn't have a week of shitty dealings between us or hate that separated us for years. Even the bruises on our faces haven't fully healed yet.

"Wanna take a ride?" he asks.

My heart jolts in surprise. "Sure."

I'll take any chance to clean up this mess between us. Bribes, favors—you name it. Marlow says it's cutting down on booze that makes me more level-headed. When I look several weeks back, what happened seems like a psychotic breakdown. It's fucking embarrassing.

I idle out of the rocky patch and toward the Devil's Caverns, tense as a steel rod the entire time.

"That's good," Droga says behind me.

I kill the motor, light up a joint, and sit down on the bench across from him.

Mom once said that admitting your mistakes can be embarrassing, but coming clean can eliminate years of hatred.

If Mom was around, she'd be alarmed at the way I've treated people for years. But that's what comes with power—*that* I learned from Dad.

"I didn't know you smoked weed," Droga says, leaning back as if purposefully displaying his tattoos.

The sight of his inked skin takes me aback. I was half-drunk during that cage fight weeks back and barely remember half of it. Things sure look more awful when you are sober.

"Anything goes these days." I take a deep puff.

"Care to share?"

I pass him the joint, watching him take a deep puff and lean with his elbows on his knees. "You look like shit, though better than before."

I chuckle before I can catch myself. And a hundred pounds that seem to sit on my chest lift.

"Thanks." I study his face, the bluish-yellow bruise on his jaw. "You look better too. Yellow looks good on you."

He squints from the smoke as he takes another drag, his eyes never leaving mine, then passes the joint back to me.

The tension between us is palpable, considering we beat each other up several times in the last weeks.

“How are you and Callie?”

“Still jealous?” Droga smirks.

“Genuinely interested.” I can’t fucking stand this strained courtesy, like a tug-of-war game where we pull at the rope but never actually put enough effort into it or try to win.

Droga’s smile grows. “Don’t you track it all on your cameras?”

Fair enough. “You really like that shower stall, huh?”

“Creep.”

But his smile is growing.

“You know,” I say, wondering for a moment if I should say it or not, then finally do. “There is a joke among the surveillance team that the outside shower on the Eastside is the wettest place on the island.”

Droga breaks out laughing, and the sound of it floods me with memories—how we used to be, the trips we used to take, how drunk we used to get, acting stupid without having to worry about others.

That was the thing I missed about our friendship—not having to pretend to be cool or important. I could just be myself and not play the fucking king, dangling carrots in front of puppets so that they bowed to me.

I chuckle, relieved that we can be like this again—easy with each other, to a degree at least.

“Maybe you are right and I’m just jealous you have someone like her,” I say quieter, cursing myself in my mind for the words that make me look weak.

“We are fucking like bunnies,” Droga says without looking at me. A smile on his lips is vague but dreamy. “I still can’t believe I have her.”

It’s a confession and an accusation.

If I didn’t get jealous back at Deene years ago, if I didn’t steal the girl my best friend had a thing for out of spite, if I didn’t let my injured ego flare up to the size of an atomic bomb, the last four years would’ve been way different. If I were a better man, I wouldn’t have fucked up my best friend. But I am not a good man. I get it. Droga is. And he’s not afraid to say how he feels.

This is change.

Droga is talking to me like he used to. I want to think he forgave me. Forgiveness is a weapon, and right now, I am unarmed. I think only now, letting go of anger and booze, I finally start understanding what he went through all those years.

I nod. "Good."

"How is Miss Lara Croft?"

The mention of Katura makes me stiffen. I can't control rolling my eyes and tonguing my cheek at the thought of her. And the fact that he called her exactly what I did. We still click. We still think the same. Down to the fucking vocabulary.

"Wow," Droga says quietly. When I meet his eyes, he leans back arrogantly, giving me a long mocking stare. "You already tapped that, didn't you, Crone?"

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ARCHER

I SMIRK, KNOWING THAT ONLY DROGA WILL UNDERSTAND THE FULL tragedy of what I am about to say.

“I have to admit with humiliation that it was the other way around.”

His face freezes in shock for just a second before he bursts out laughing.

He’s always had a contagious laugh. I can’t help but grin, shaking my head.

“I won’t ask for details, Crone. But knowing Katura, I can see... yeah... I mean... She can be devastating to your ego.”

“Yeah...” I echo. “She is... fuck... everywhere. Like the chewing gum you step into with brand-new shoes, you know?”

She is addictive, and only staying away for days more or less curbs the craving for her.

“Listen,” he says, his smile fading. “Katura came here for a reason, yeah?”

I nod.

“She is nice. But keep your eyes on her. I know you like skirts and I have a feeling she likes a good lay. So you might’ve found a perfect match. But she brought a satellite phone with her to the island, which is still in her belongings if you want them.”

Satellite phone, huh?

“Also, Crone... A person in town said Butcher is planning some shit. That surveillance disruption that he pinned on the Savages was his doing.”

“Yeah.”

Anger simmers in my veins. I don't like that everyone is talking about it like it's common knowledge. Yet no one is talking to *me* about it.

And Marlow? It's his job to keep the surveillance in check. And Raven's job is to deal with the gangs in Port Mrei, including Butcher, the self-proclaimed mayor. I have enough on my plate with Gen-Alpha.

"You probably know it all anyway," Droga says. "But the rumor is your security has holes. People are being smuggled to and off the island. Sonny Little"—he nods toward the kid on the beach—"said they come almost every day, back and forth."

"Uh-huh."

Droga's words are news to me. I am not paying millions to my security team to look past holes. And the fact that a homeless kid in Port Mrei knows how to get through my port security is a fucking joke. The last thing we need is Russian moles slipping through those very holes.

"I appreciate the info. I'll tell Marlow," I say, trying to calm the rising anger. "Listen. I don't want to come across as super lenient after being a psycho for the longest time."

I pause, letting it sink in. I don't give a shit that I sound weak. Droga is a better man. He came back to the island after what I've put him through. So, in my book, he can think anything he wants.

"The hurricane season is coming. It's delayed this year, but they say, it's gonna be the heaviest in ten years. It could wipe the Eastside out in a minute. So you guys need to move"

"I'll talk to everyone. Not sure it will work."

"Droga, come on." I give him an irritated stare. "This is not a joke. It's either relocating to Ayana or taking a chance on being dead."

"Harsh."

"That's what it is. No bullshit."

Droga nods. "Something needs to be done, I agree. It's just... The general mood about Ayana and... you. You know."

"I know. I'm surprised they are not shooting at me right now." I snort, but Droga is not smiling. "Tell them it's a peace offering. They can build a fucking village in Ayana for all I care. But I'm not bringing the death toll up. Not when everyone blames me for everything."

The Outcasts are still on the beach, dispersed, but still watching. Bikinis, board shorts—they look like they are on vacation.

I nod toward them. "Aren't they tired of living like Tarzans?"

“We’ve lived like this for two years.”

“Tell them I’ll give them access to the mainland. Get their bank accounts re-activated.” There is no stopping me now. I made peace with Droga, and there are a whole bunch more people to come. “I know I fucked a lot of them. I’m not proud of it. But it wasn’t supposed to last that long, you know.” I swallow the words and the memories of the night when the world sank into a nuclear war. “Those first two weeks were madness. A horror story. We were all fucked in our heads, and I had to do what I had to do to keep some control over it.” I exhale heavily. We can talk about it for hours, but it will have to be some other time. “If they want to leave the island, I’ll get the jet ready. Bribe them.”

Droga nods as he stares at me with what I think is curiosity. I don’t make sense, I know. Not the Crone from a week ago. I don’t look away, only smirk, trying to hide unease.

“I’m so fucking tired, Droga. Of this, the island, the world that turned into shit.” I exhale heavily again. “What’s the deal with the kid?” I ask, changing the topic.

Droga shrugs. “He’ll be better off here than in Port Mrei. That town...” He shakes his head and digs the heel of his foot into the deck like he’s trying to dig a hole. “I get it you don’t visit it often, if ever. Port Mrei is turning into a dump. The Ashlands is already a slum.”

“And?”

“You own this island. Aren’t you concerned?”

I take a moment to think over the words. No one understands that this island was a pride project at first and is now dragging me like a rope around my neck with a stone that is slowly sinking to the bottom of a dark hole.

“Right now, Port Mrei is not my priority,” I finally say, getting up. “But they”—I nod toward the beach—“should be yours.”

“Right.”

I start the motor and idle the boat toward the beach. I feel exhausted like I’ve gone through the most nerve-wracking interview in my life.

I want to stay longer, but they won’t invite me. I am the enemy, the guy with a whip and an army of guards.

“About Katura,” Droga says when I pull up to the dock but don’t kill the motor. “You might wanna tone down on the dick attitude. I don’t think it will work with her. If you want to figure out what’s up.”

The mention of her makes me tense up, and surprisingly, I am looking forward to going back to Ayana and messing with her. But I also need to keep my distance.

Since Kat started working in the office, I've been lifting weights in the gym, throwing myself into work, and spending more time with the scientists in the lab just to keep my mind off her. She is not even around, but the memory of her drags me toward her.

Droga jumps onto the pier.

"Stay in touch in the next couple of days, yeah?" he says, walking backward. "I'll talk to Maddy. Say hi to Katura."

He smiles like he knows what I'm thinking. And now that we are parting, my thoughts are all about the long legs, braided hair, and scorching eyes.

The Outcasts on the beach are still gaping at me. They need to chill it the fuck down.

I start idling away when I hear, "Hey, Crone!"

Droga stands with his hands on his waist, smiling at me, looking like a bad-ass motherfucker with his tattoos. "Keep your surveillance off that shower stall, will you?" he shouts as I throttle the boat away.

I shake my head and turn away so he doesn't see me grin.

KAT

I CAN DIG LIVING ON A TROPICAL ISLAND, YEAH.

Swimming in the mornings is my favorite part of the day.

Well, besides talking to Archer when he has a minute—which is rare in the last week.

And besides the nights out with Marlow when he introduces me to the spring-breakers one by one. Though most of them seem to be too hostile toward me.

And besides chilling in the evenings on the small deck of my bungalow that is too big for one person. They call it a “hut.” To me, it’s a mansion. The buzzing of the insects, the exotic birds, the faint smell of blooming flowers mixed with the humid salty air—it’s paradise.

Turns out, there’s quite a bit I like about this island.

I don’t use a scooter or electric hoverboard. Who needs a gym when you can walk thousands of footsteps a day just by taking all these steep paths and staircases that etch the resort?

It’s only a twenty-minute walk to the Center, up the road through the cooler jungle.

But today is another day with no Archer in sight.

The entire week I saw him three or four times, briefly, no talking, usually escorted by one of his assistants or the Pink Medusa.

It’s frustrating because I miss the prick. But this also helps to keep my mind out of the gutter.

I’ve finished all the files of the Eastern-European guards. Some of them had to go to my dad, who accepted Archer’s proposal to do a thorough

background check on the employees that no one on this island has access to.

The fact that my dad now sort of works for Archer is bewildering. But in this way, I talk to him almost every day.

That's the first thing I do at the Center after spending some time in the break room. I turn on the work laptop on my desk, plug in the headphones, and dial Dad.

"Kat," he tells me again like I'm failing. "Aleksei Tsariuk is not stupid. If he sent someone, he probably outsourced them to avoid suspicion. You need to look at the files differently. Anyone from outside Eastern Europe who has ties to it. Anyone who's been on the island longer than Gen-Alpha has been in play. Those who were hired just recently. Anyone with a bad record. Anyone with an immaculate record. Anyone with a lapse of employment. With *unusual* employment—"

"So, everyone."

"Yes. You have to go through *every* file and comb through it like it's the main suspect. It takes time. If anything raises suspicion, I'm right here to help you dig deeper."

"Got it."

This is tedious work, but I got it. And I like that we sound like we are a team.

"As to Milena Tsariuk... I know you don't have access to the spring-breakers' files. We have some of them here. We did that before you left. The truth is, Milena Tsariuk might be dead."

"You mean..."

For the first time, the possibility that Milena might've been one of the girls who died on Zion occurs to me, plunging my stomach low. What if that was Olivia? I can surely ask for the files of the deceased.

"Yes. She might not be on the island, or she died on the mainland. There are thousands still missing, and that might be the reason Tsariuk can't find her. But he'll never stop. And for Mr. Crone's sake, and since you are there, you should still do the job thoroughly. Since he hired you and all."

"It's Archer."

"It's Mr. Crone, since he is an employer. Our conversations might be getting friendlier, but he is an employer."

I frown. "What do you mean *conversations*? How many did you have?"

Dad doesn't answer, only cocks his head.

"Dad?"

“A few.”

“About what?” I say a little too impatiently, angry that Archer talks to my dad behind my back.

I snort right away to hide my annoyance and roll my eyes.

“Kit-Kat?” Dad’s gaze is too prying now. He puckers his lips to the side like he does when he is disappointed. “Don’t mess around. That’s not what you are there for. Do your job and come back.”

I haven’t told him anything about Archer. Did Archer? The bastard knows how to throw bait.

I smooth a strand of my hair over one shoulder, irritated at the last bit of lecture. “I know.”

Even more irritated, I get back to the files and do what Dad told me to.

I skip lunch, deep in the private contractors’ info, Blackwater, death squads, dishonorable discharges, which I mark with red to make sure to send them to my dad. Hospital records—another one, since the guards hired for Zion are not supposed to have any medical conditions. That’s a clause in the agreement.

I decide to read one more file for the day.

Jacob O’Shea. British. Thirty-seven. 5’6. Five years in the British Military Academy. A two-year gap in employment—red flag, so I mark it. UAE private military group—interesting. Then a private British investigation agency.

Blah-blah-blah.

I check with a red marker the sketchy parts and go to family history.

Wife and a child, deceased.

I sigh sympathetically. It’s only when you read the files do you realize how many of those contractors lost their families during the nuclear attacks. Just like everyone else. It’s common. Tragedy is the new black, even two years after the Change, with spikes in medical conditions, cancer, and suicide.

But that’s not what catches my attention.

O’Shea has another child, and the name makes my heart skip a beat.

Igor Portnoy, age fourteen.

There is nothing else about him, no address or citizenship.

I open the laptop.

The boy’s name doesn’t come up in a search. No social media. No records.

But the kid's name is Eastern European, if not Russian. What are the odds? How does a British guy have no family left but one child who happens to be Eastern European?

Adrenalin tingles in my nerves, making me restless.

I punch his deceased wife's name in the search engine, then put in 'Great Britain' to narrow it down.

The article that comes up first is about her and her toddler daughter burned in a house fire. Fourteen years ago.

Wait-wait-wait.

So the same year he had a child with a different name, he also had his legit wife and daughter burn down in a fire.

You don't need to be a psychic to sense something sketchy about the story.

I go to O'Shea's file on the computer. All digital records are cross-referenced with the days of enrollment, the country they came from, and contractor info.

He came with another guy, and I pull up the guy's file.

Brandon Cunningham. Thirty-four. 5'7.

His file doesn't have anything suspicious. Nothing to tie him with O'Shea except that he worked as private security. Also in UAE... Right, the Emirates. I check the years of employment there—the same as O'Shea's.

I email the digital copies of the files to Dad with the comment about O'Shea's surviving son.

Too excited to hold the news to myself, I call Marlow.

KAT

I'D NEVER THOUGHT THAT THE NOSTALGIA ABOUT THE NORMAL TIMES would be triggered by shopping and takeouts.

I've been doing takeouts occasionally. But I ordered a whole bunch of groceries delivered from Port Mrei and cook in the evenings. Cooking reminds me of home. Takeouts—of before the Change.

Marlow comes over every now and then, digging into my food ferociously like he's been in prison.

"What, girls on this island don't cook?" I chuckle every time, watching him eat.

"Honestly—" he tries to talk with his mouth full.

"Dude, swallow, then talk." I laugh though feel proud he enjoys my simple cooking so much.

Marlow is my best buddy here on Zion, and by the looks of it, besides him sitting on the phone with Ty or driving an ATV to the Eastside in the evenings to go see the Outcasts now that it's not an issue, he doesn't really hang out much with anyone else.

"Shit gets old," he said the other day. "You are like a breath of fresh air here. Plus, I'm watching you."

"Oh, really?" I feign surprise, and he winks.

Tonight, I offer another dinner. Instead, Marlow suggests going to Tapas, a fusion cuisine restaurant and a hot spot. "Let's hang out in the bar tonight."

I'm all for it, and in twenty minutes, he drops by.

“Oh, look at you,” he says, openly studying me as he leans on the doorway, hands in his pockets. “If I didn’t know better, I would’ve thought this was a date.”

I snort. “Keep dreaming.”

I’m just messing with him, though I liked the compliment.

I’m wearing a dark-red short jumpsuit with low cleavage. Burgundy tractor boots. No matter the weather, nothing will stop me from wearing boots. Looking in the mirror, I see what he means—I look hot. I wish I was hanging out with Archer tonight. But he’s MIA. Again. So annoying.

Evenings in Zion are charming. The air is warm with the salty breeze from the ocean and abundant lights as we walk to the restaurant that’s ten minutes away.

Tapas hides in a thick patch of palm trees, sprinkled with twinkling lanterns. It has an open-air area with several tables nestled under the heavy plumeria trees and an inside sitting area.

There are only a dozen or so people in the bar, a group of older folks at one table—the sight of anyone older than thirty still surprises me. Ayana is like a community of those who found a fountain of youth until you see older people.

“Scientists from the lab,” Marlow explains. “Really humble guys if you don’t think of Nobel prizes, Bader and Bower Award, and all that jazz.”

I pick a table in the very corner.

“Choosing the best spy spot?” Marlow chuckles as he plants his ass in the chair across the table from me and right away orders us cocktails. He knows just what I like but surprises me every time. No one cards here. Gotta love broken-rules society.

We’ve been to restaurants several times. Every time Marlow tells me the backstory of anyone who is there. So far, we haven’t been successful in meeting many spring-breakers.

“I actually need to tell you something,” I say. “Without a chance of anyone eavesdropping.”

And when the waiter—a local, by the looks of it, just like most service personnel—brings our cocktails, I tell Marlow about O’Shea.

Marlow is even cuter when he is serious, though his smile can seduce pretty much any girl in the world. Except me. Because I am into smirks. A particular one, that appears on lips that curl just a little bit crookedly to one side when they say, “Kitten.”

“There’s nothing useful in the database,” I say, finishing the story. “I sent Dad O’Shea’s info.”

“Chances are, if the guy works for Tsariuk, there will be nothing to find.”

“It’s his son I’m interested in. Dad will need some time to get to his connections abroad. Meanwhile...” I shift in my seat and lean with my elbows on the table. “I need to know O’Shea’s schedule at Ayana.”

Marlow narrows his eyes at me. “Why?”

I cock my head as if in reproach. “Gonna swing by him and see if I can sniff anything out.”

“Yeah.” Marlow rolls his eyes. “You already did that once. There are rumors.”

“What rumors?”

He snorts. “All sorts of rumors. The Big Boss driving to the Diggs to pick you up like you are a naughty kid? I mean...”

“Tsk, fucking Archer. Ruined that one, huh? What’s his deal? He constantly insists on teaching me how to do my job.”

I meet Marlow’s sneaky smile that I’m not so fond of at the moment. “What, Marlow?” I snap.

His smile widens. “His attention has nothing to do with your methods but more with the fact that our Chancellor seems too sensitive to anything you do.”

“How so?”

I try not to blush, feigning indifference.

But when Marlow takes a sip of his cocktail with an intentional loud slurp, I cock my eyebrow.

“You know he likes women.” Marlow wiggles his brows.

“Yeah, that’s a no-brainer. And?”

“I told you not to play with fire. And you do what?”

“And I do what?”

“Sleep with him.”

I’m startled. “He *told* you? Gah! Unbelievable!”

Marlow bursts out into laughter so loud that heads turn in our direction.

“I win!” He punches the air with a fist.

“Pardon me?”

“Ty and I had a bet.”

“Oh, you bet on me and Archer, you snake?”

“Chill. We did. But I mean, come on. You two were kinda obvious something was gonna happen. Either you’d kill each other or fuck. I don’t talk to Archer about you, but you”—he leans over, picks up a strand of my hair, and curls it around his finger with the most charming grin—“just gave yourself away, señorita.”

I swat his hand away, lean back in my chair, and cross my arms at my chest, sending him a glare. “Nicholas Perry Marlow, I really don’t like you right now.”

Marlow flashes me a smile. “Yeah, you do. You are not that sensitive. Well, not with me. Maybe with Mr. Chancellor.”

Asshole.

“Is he any good?”

God, if his laughter wasn’t so contagious, I would’ve choked him out. I purse my lips, shake my head, and scan the restaurant.

“I see you and Ty are all cozy again,” I say, trying to change the topic.

Now that the Berlin Wall is down, Marlow visits the Eastside every other day.

His expression softens at the mention. “It’s so nice after two years, yeah. Maddy took a boat with me there. We talked about them relocating and they agreed. Sort of.”

“Huh.”

“Listen, they didn’t have access to the mainland for two years. Some of them have surviving relatives. Some like Ty and Owen have a huge inheritance. So, yeah... They are moving west.”

“Wow...”

Marlow’s expression goes grim. “Listen, I know Archer has a bad reputation. After the Change, things weren’t pretty. We might’ve been cooped up in the prettiest place, but we were trying to cope, you know, and figure things out. Money doesn’t solve mental problems. We had a mourning streak. Then an angry streak. Then partied like crazy. *Survival of the littest*, we called it. We got over it. But Archer... He started partying on his own.”

“What does that mean?”

“He isolated himself from the rest. Locked himself up for days, got drunk and high. Then re-emerged and worked like a maniac for days without sleep.” For a moment, Marlow absently stares at his cocktail. “I think we all kinda bonded more for some time after the Change. Archer—

he doesn't know how to bond. Except for with Droga back in the day. So he just... started losing it, you know. He used to be different back at Deene..."

Marlow goes quiet again.

I wish I knew that old Archer, the one with a smile that's happy, with cockiness that's cheerful and not bitter. *The Archer* who enjoyed life.

"But!" Marlow cheers to me with a drink. "Looks like Archer is back on track." He winks at me like I know the secret.

"And the rest? Why won't they leave?"

"Many of them—us—don't work or work remotely. We have fat bank accounts."

"You don't go see family?"

"Most are not allowed. This is not a resort. It's a restricted area. Some of our family members come. If they can get the clearance. The Attorney General. Senators. Those with their own private jets."

"Why don't you leave? Go to Australia?"

"Not now. I have a commitment to Archer. But in the future, when the world lockdown eases... Who knows."

Just then, a familiar yapping comes from the distance. And surprise-surprise, the Pink Medusa sashays toward us across the floor, all purple dress, pink stilettos, and cunt attitude. Two girls in mini dresses stare at us from the table in the opposite corner of the restaurant—I didn't even see them come in. Which is surprising because Margot's screechy voice can wake up the dead.

I'm not sure what bothers me about some of the spring-breakers, except the fact that the only thing they did right in this life was to be born with a silver spoon in their mouths.

Margot's eyes zero in on me and Marlow as she slows, and her bright-pink lips spread in a sleazy smile as she stops at our table and leans on it with her perfectly manicured hands and a giant opal ring. The stench of her overly-sweet perfume makes me wanna vomit.

"You sure prefer male company," she says to me, then turns to Marlow. "Hey, Nick."

"I prefer intelligent company," I murmur quieter, not looking at her.

"Can't lose the habit of getting around?"

If she doesn't go away soon, I swear, my pretty tractor boot will go right up her ass.

She doesn't stop. "Entertaining yourself elsewhere while Archer is busy?"

"Margot, seriously." Marlow chuckles. He is too nice to people.

"Yes," I snap. "And I see you got a habit of spying on me in hopes to find Archer. So desperate," I add under my breath and lift my eyes at her.

The glint in Margot's eyes is sharp as steel. She taps her lemon-colored nail on the table. "See you around," and leaves as I murmur, "Unfortunately," and roll my eyes at Marlow.

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ARCHER

KAT NEVER TEXTS ME. WHAT GIRL NEVER TEXTS THE GUY SHE LIKES?

No flirting. No questions. She's made friends with everyone at the Center. Goes on lunch breaks with the surveillance guys. Her laughter seeps into my office now and then, getting under my skin, but when I stare her down across the window, she doesn't respond.

In fact, it looks like she is avoiding me. And it pisses me off. Considering my right hand will soon go numb from obsessive self-care.

Avoiding her doesn't seem to work out so great.

She doesn't know it, but I talk to her father more often than her.

It's late evening, and I'm at the villa, standing by the pool with a glass of cognac.

The pool will forever remind me of Kat. One night with her, and my bed, pool, and breakfast table remind me of her being here.

I'm staring at her picture on my phone, wondering if I should summon her to the villa—yeah, I've been drinking. The screenshot is of the cam footage of her at my pool. Head tilted back against the edge of it. Her body illuminated in neon blue. Her tits above the water, nipples hard and so delicious I can almost feel the texture of them in my mouth.

My dick hardens. Always does. The picture is grainy but beautiful. And my self-control obviously doesn't work.

Granted, I'm on my sixth drink and my patience is nowhere in sight.

Just then a text flashes on my screen.

Margot: Is she servicing just you? Or you share these days?

The attached picture makes my insides turn cold.

It's Marlow and Kat, smiling, leaning toward each other across a restaurant table as he curls a strand of her hair around his fingers.

Motherfucker!

Anger flares inside me, and I try to swallow it down with the rest of my drink.

I pull up the app that tracks Kat's phone—Tapas.

So they are on a date...

I check on her every day. Well, lies—several times a day. Maybe every hour when I'm not in the office. I need to know she doesn't go around Zion and do anything reckless. We have a deal. Mr. Ortiz now provides me with intel. And I quite enjoy getting to know him behind her back.

Yet, I don't quite trust her. Especially with myself. I know she's been getting social, though knowing the snobby nature of the spring-breakers, the elites won't accept her easily, if at all. So all those nights she spends out are mostly with Marlow.

I stare at the picture, and my blood boils at the fact that they look like lovers.

Is that the reason she doesn't try to pursue me like any normal girl who'd already be riding my dick on a regular basis?

I was busy this week and trying to get her out of my mind. So, I let her be for a week, and she and Marlow get cozy.

Fucking Marlow!

Because it's been several weeks since I binged, the drink is hitting me in the head. But I make another one and in half an hour I want to send bolts of fury onto this island. I don't go out anymore, but this is about to change as I snatch my phone and type.

Me: What are you doing?

Kat doesn't respond.

Ten minutes.

Twenty.

She is ignoring me.

So I text Marlow.

Me: Are you at Tapas?

Marlow: Hey, Archer. Yeah. What's up?

My fucking patience is what's up.

Me: I'll meet you outside in five. Need to talk.

And I'm on my bike, zooming to central Ayana.

Marlow is outside, smoking in the shadow of a palm tree when I park. The Gigolo is wearing a button-down shirt, his chest exposed, hair all slicked back in a man bun with one strand hanging onto his face.

A fucking date, huh?

There is no one outside. The resort is quiet on a weekday. A dozen nasty thoughts go through my mind, including the image of Kat and Marlow peacefully romancing at a fucking restaurant.

Without waiting, I stomp toward Marlow, who stares at me with amusement—granted, I haven’t been out and about for months.

But I am not amused in the least. I step into him, fisting his shirt, and slam him against the tree trunk.

“Are you fucking her?” I bark.

“Dude! What the hell?”

He tries to push me away, but I’m not having it. I hold him tightly, wanting to smash his face in as I lean over and hiss in his ear, “Are you fucking her? And don’t fucking lie, because I’ll find out anyway.”

“Fuck off, Archer!” He pushes me hard, and I stumble back, my heart pumping like mad. “What’s your problem?”

“*She* is my problem. And responsibility.”

I charge at him, but he pushes me back hard.

“Dude! Chill! Drunk, huh?” We stare at each other. Me with loathing. He with amusement like I’m a fucking unicorn.

Marlow bends to pick up the dropped cigarette from the ground, then takes a deep drag, the tip burning in the shadow of the tree as he stares me up and down.

“She is single and can fuck whoever she wants,” he says so calmly that I want to break his fucking face.

“So you *are* fucking her?”

The thought rubs me like the sound of nails scratching against glass.

“Tame it down a bit, yeah?” He tips his chin.

I breathe heavily.

My thoughts are a trainwreck. I was trying to be nice, professional, give her space. And she goes and fucks someone else. I want to punch something. Rip someone’s heart out. She’ll be on the first boat off this island tomorrow.

Marlow flicks the cigarette away and stabs his hands in his pockets.

“You are not her type,” I say, though I have a feeling Kat doesn’t have a type. It makes me angry. She is careless like a dude. Chicks are not supposed to be like this. “You don’t know how to handle her.” My own words make me even angrier.

“I’ve never seen you jealous, Archer.” Marlow chuckles through his nose.

I’ll punch the motherfucker, I swear.

“I’m not jealous.”

I’m giving too much of myself to this, but I can’t help it.

“Oh, yeah? So you flew here to the restaurant to check on her just *because*? And trying to start a fight with me—that’s because you feel *responsible* for her? What is she, your sister?”

“Fuck off.”

“That’s your problem, Archer. You think people owe you attention. Women specifically. You are so used to them dropping their panties for you at the snap of your fingers that you forget how to appreciate them. You can’t even see your own feelings for what they are.”

“Which are?”

“You want her.” He is so calm that it ticks me off, but I try to hold back my rage. “Why not tell her so instead of waiting for her to come over and get down on her knees for you? Jesus, dude, step it up, will you?”

He smooths his hair. So fucking understanding and perfect. Is that what Kat likes in him?

Marlow rubs his neck. “She won’t sit around waiting for someone whose arrogance is the size of the Empire State to spare her a minute. Only to fuck her and walk away.”

Nice. She is telling him about our little get-togethers.

“Oh, she told you she fucked me. Does she confide in you now?” Bitterness is like a snake, coiling in my heart.

The sound of Marlow’s abrupt laughter scratches my ears and nerves and pride. “She didn’t have to. You just did. You two are sooo alike.”

“We are not.”

“Whatever. And no, I didn’t fuck her, Archer. We are friends. I am not interested in her that way, and she won’t shut up about you. So there.” He locks his eyes with me.

The last words wash over me like a soft tide. Smoothly. Quietly.

Marlow pulls a joint out of his pocket and lights it. “Do you want me to go back to Tapas, or you gonna go and spend time with the girl who fusses about every message you send yet refuses to respond?”

He laughs through his nose.

“I got it,” I blurt and feel like a fucking schoolboy who just made a fool out of himself. I’ve never fussed about women. But this one...

Marlow slaps me on the shoulder, startling me. “Sometimes you are such an idiot, Archer. Seriously. Makes me wonder...”

I would punch him any other time, but before I say anything, he is already walking away into the dark street, humming a song.

KAT

I SIP MY COCKTAIL AND SWIPE THROUGH THE PICTURES OF AYANA THAT Marlow took for me since my phone can't take any.

The light lounge music is relaxing.

I'm officially very tipsy.

Very is defined by the fact that I don't give a shit about the Pink Medusa and her chihuahuas laughing loudly at the table across the room. And also by the fact that I'm about to break rule number one—do not text guys when you are drunk.

I open the messages and reread Archer's. "**Where are you?**" Like I can transmit the dozens of replies I've wanted to send in the last hour.

Very tipsy because, against my better judgment, I finally type in the response.

Me: Sitting in a castle, waiting for Prince Charming to show up.

I press *send*.

Well, that was stupid, I curse myself right away.

Yes, I'm drunk.

But that's why I keep thinking about Archer despite being entertained by Marlow.

There's someone behind me, leaning over.

"Doesn't look like a castle but here I am."

The voice makes me turn around, and my heart slams in my chest at the sight—Archer.

With an arrogant smile and his eyes too sparkly to let me know he is not quite sober, he slides into Marlow's chair.

“Where’s Marlow?” I ask.

“Passed the torch to me.”

“I don’t know about Marlow’s torch but I sure am surprised to see you here.”

His eyes narrow on me. “What is it about Marlow that you like?”

“Do I detect jealousy?”

“It’s a simple question, Kat. You are not close with anyone besides him.”

We both lean back in our chairs, staring at each other like it’s a competition. Finally, we talk, for the first time in more than a week.

“We click,” I say. “He is a nice guy. I like his sense of humor. We speak Russian.”

I simplify it because there is no real way to tell how you become friends with someone.

Archer chuckles. “That’s it?”

“Is it not enough to qualify for a friend?”

“So...” He leans on the table, clasping his hands together. “If I learn Russian, we will be friends as per qualifications?”

“We won’t be friends, Archer.” I snort. “Friends don’t do what we do. I quite enjoy what we do. So don’t ruin it with this friendship nonsense.”

“Harsh. Doesn’t hurt to try.”

“What?”

“To prove you wrong.”

I can’t help but raise my eyebrows.

He constantly tries to prove me wrong. But this. Friendship. Nuh-huh. I don’t like the sound of it.

The waiter comes over and sets a glass in front of Archer. Without ever asking. I assume it’s cognac. “Welcome back, Mr. Crone. Would you like to see the menu?”

Here we go—kissing ass at its finest.

“No, thank you. Did you eat already?” Archer asks me.

I nod.

“Right.” There’s that smirk on his lips as he waves the waiter away. “So how do you say *what’s your name* in Russian? We’ll start on that last qualification to see if your theory works.”

He is relentless if he wants to be.

“Informal? *Kak te-bia za-voot*,” I say slowly, surprised he isn’t asking for swear words. Surprised, because we are talking about something other than work or tossing innuendos at each other.

Archer repeats it slowly, and Goddam if his accent doesn’t sound silly but also incredibly sexy.

“*I like you*. Say it in Russian,” he says.

“*Ty mn’e nra-vish-sia*,” I say, taking a slow sip of my cocktail.

I also like where this is going. And I really like *him* right now.

Yep, I’m drunk.

Archer’s lips move but don’t repeat the words out loud. “*I can’t get you out of my mind*,” he says, his smile widening.

I stall. Are we still just playing?

“Oh.” He leans back in his chair. “Sounds like level two.”

“Is it? Too complicated?”

“For now, yes.”

Are we talking about us?

“Let’s try something easier,” he says. “How do you say… kitten.”

I smile. He wants it simple? *Yeah, I’ll make it simple, Mr. Chancellor.*

“*Ka-ra-lé-va*,” I say, killing my smile not to raise suspicion.

He narrows his eyes at me. “*Ka-ra-le-va*,” he repeats. God, I love his accent. “How do you say *my*?”

I know where this is going. He doesn’t. That’s the beauty of being bilingual.

“*Ma-já*.”

Archer’s lips stretch in that stupidly irresistible smile that gets me all stirred up when he repeats softly, “*Ma-ja ka-ra-le-va*.” He grins. “How does that sound?”

“Fantastic. You should say it more often.”

“Yeah? You like that, kitten?” He leans over on the table. “You know you want me.”

“I don’t,” I blurt just to see his reaction.

His brow arches. “I can’t figure out why you keep denying it.”

“Maybe because there are plenty of guys on this island. Gorgeous. Rich. And acting like gentlemen to get the girl instead of being pricks.”

His gaze darkens though he keeps his beautiful smile. “Oh, you like gentlemen?”

“I don’t like pricks.” Lies. He is the only prick I want.

“I think our previous encounter proved otherwise. I have one for you. You can play. You’ll need both hands, kitten.”

I roll my eyes. Here we go. “Big dick doesn’t count when it’s your personality.”

He laughs through his nose. “You are lying to yourself. I bet you think of me when you come on your solo rides, missing me for days.”

“I bet you are hard right now,” I blurt, stiffening as I keep his gaze. God, I want him so much it’s ridiculous.

“Want to check? There’s so much we can do with it. I’m not even hiding it.” He leans back and throws his arm around the back of the chair. “That’s not even a fun bet. Wanna bet how long I can keep going buried inside you? That is if you don’t run away, afraid to let go, and enjoy yourself.”

My heart thuds in my chest at the dare. “Afraid?” Fucker is challenging me. “You sure are mouthy today.”

“Oral is my favorite.”

And still a mystery. Sigh.

His openness and the way a smile tugs at his lips drives me insane.

“Wait. We can do better.” His smile grows wider. “Wanna bet that if you let go you’ll do things with me that you thought were disgusting before, yet you will ask me to do them again?”

He is tipsy. I am tipsy. This is way more open than any other conversation we had before.

“Like what?” I try to keep a straight face, even force a little smirk on my lips.

He drops his gaze to them, and his smile grows into a grin when he raises his eyes to meet mine. “Curious, Miss Ortiz? Would you like to find out?”

Yes! “Your flirting is becoming very straightforward.”

“It’s not flirting. It’s an invitation. I’m straightforward like that. It’s been way too long. And since you are already wet, we should go to my place.”

“Presumptuous.” But the idea is already etched in my mind.

“Should I check?”

Yes. “Next time.”

“Next time, you let me know when you are thinking about me. I’ll make a guest appearance. So your fingers don’t go numb from self-care.”

“You are dreaming, Archer.”

His low chuckle makes my already wet panties soaked. “Oh, kitten. I can tell you all about my dreams. You are all over them. Wet. Wide open. Begging for more.”

There’s an image of his naked body pinning me against his bed in my mind.

And there’s that sharp sound of stilettos against the hard floor again.

“Oh, look who graced us with his presence!” Margot yaps as she makes her way across the room.

She’s like a bee that flies around the sweet cocktail you are about to drink. Every time she is close I want to swat her away.

“I didn’t hear anyone calling your name,” I say. “Looks like you enjoy interrupting my evening.”

No, not a bee—a needle on the couch you sit down on by accident.

She fakes a smile. “Oh, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Clearly.”

She turns to Archer. “I was going to discuss that at work, but you weren’t there.”

Jesus, girl, sit down.

She is so obvious it’s pathetic.

“The meeting with the board—”

“We’ll talk about it later, Margot.” Archer doesn’t look at her, but she clearly doesn’t get the message.

“No. Because I have to arrange it tomorrow, and you won’t be there.” She pulls out her phone, swiping it as she searches for something.

“Desperate, huh?” I murmur.

Her head snaps in my direction. “Do you like having a job, Katura?”

I’ve seen that vicious stare somewhere. Oh, right. That snake that bit me.

I don’t break our eye contact. “Do you like having legs, Margot?” I swear I’ll go Tonya Harding on her.

An amused chuckle escapes Archer’s mouth.

Margot murmurs, “Savage,” then turns to him and leans on the table to partially block me.

I’m gonna lose my patience with this one. “Excuse me,” I say and head toward the restroom around the corner, but then step out between the palm trees and into the shadowy back street, leaving the restaurant.

The Pink Medusa always manages to interrupt, making me angry. Archer lets her. And he basks in this attention. He knows how much she annoys the hell out of me.

One thing cuts through the anger, and I smile as I head up the main street toward the northern part of Ayana.

My kitten.

I snort to myself.

Next time Archer and I are together, I'll bring him to his knees. I'll make him repeat the words I taught him.

Maja karaleva.

So that when he kneels for me, he can call me, "My queen" in Russian.

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ARCHER

DID SHE JUST DITCH ME AGAIN?

Margot has been hovering around me like an annoying drone for over ten minutes, but Kat is nowhere to be seen.

That's when my phone beeps.

Kat: Enjoying your evening?

Seriously?

Me: Where are you?

Kat: Home.

I squeeze the phone in my hand so hard my knuckles turn white. Unbelievable.

Me: So you ran away without saying goodbye?

Kat: Your fan club got in the way. I'm not a groupie.

Me: I sense jealousy. I like it.

Kat: I like when you make me come. Doesn't happen very often.

Oh, kitten is drunk. No filter.

My lips stretch in a grin. It's on.

But Margot's chatter in my ear about work is about to send me into psycho mode.

Me: We weren't done, kitten.

Kat: Oh, I'm definitely not. Just starting. Solo ride, as always... Enjoy your evening.

I stifle a grunt as I type.

Me: Are you teasing me?

Margot asks me something, but my eyes are glued to the screen and the bubble—Kat typing something.

There.

Kat: You told me to let you know next time I think about you...

Kat: Wait, I need to switch hands...

Her words drip into my brain, making me insta-hard. This solo ride is about to turn into a duet.

I rise from the table so abruptly that the chair almost falls, and Margot's eyes flicker at me in surprise.

"Archer!" she calls as I leave without saying a word, typing:

Me: Do not fucking move. I'm coming.

Kat: Me too, soon...

Fuck...

Me: Don't you dare.

I zoom to her bungalow, at her door only a minute later. No one answers the knock, but it's open, and I walk in, my blood simmering with anticipation.

It's a studio-type bungalow, usually reserved for guests. I'm surprised Kat didn't switch for a bigger one. But not surprised it's her place—clothes hanging over the armchair, on the couch, on the bed, shoes lined up on the floor, magazines, books.

She is chaos. And now she's in my head.

Her scent is everywhere—coconut oil or whatever she uses for her skin.

The bed is made but empty. The door to the patio is open.

"Kat?" I call, walking slowly to the center of the room.

There is a beach towel hanging over the patio railing, a wicker chair and a little table with an ashtray.

This is so Kat.

I haven't been here yet, and it's almost intimate—seeing where she lives, *how* she lives.

"Kat?" There's silence in response.

I pull out my phone.

Me: I'm at your place, and you are not.

Only seconds go by when I get a response.

A picture.

Her bare legs and feet, crossed at the ankles.

I want to send a question mark when I zoom in at the surface she has her feet on...

My motherfucking coffee table.

I want to be angry at her for playing games, but a chuckle escapes me.

This fucking girl...

I storm out of her place, jump on the bike, and race to my villa.

I am so charged by the time I storm into my living room that I don't care about words or flirting or beating around the bush. I need to touch her. Kiss her. Fuck her. No one else ever made me feel like a buck in rut.

Kat is right there on my couch, her arm leisurely stretched along the back of it, her feet still on my table—barefoot, lucky her—as she gazes at me with that playful smile that I want to slap off her face with my cock.

“You are sooooo in trouble...” I say and lunge at her, grab her by the ankle, and pull her toward me, yanking her down onto her back.

She squeals and twists her foot out of my grasp, jumps up, and squirms onto the coffee table, trying to get away.

But she has no chance. I catch her, wrap my arm around her waist, and wrestle her down onto the table, on her back, putting all my weight on her.

“Don't fucking run from me again, kitten,” I whisper and crash my mouth into hers.

The table is too small for both of us. Kat's head is hanging off as I kiss her like I need to breathe through her mouth.

We are not even kissing—we are greedily lapping at each other, grunts and whimpers lacing together as I fist her hair, holding her head so I can kiss her deeper, fuck her mouth with my tongue.

This is intense.

This is madness.

Finally.

We both buck our hips, rubbing against each other. The coffee table is the most uncomfortable place to make out, yet it feels like Kat is on an altar, and that makes it even hotter.

I pull her to a sitting position and yank the straps of her jumpsuit off her shoulders, then push it down her body and legs. She pulls my shirt up and practically rips it over my head.

I'm on my knees on the floor—what do you know. She has her sweet ass planted on my coffee table. And we don't stop kissing, our mouths looking for bare skin.

Everything about her is intense. Her soft lips. Her velvety tongue that slithers into my mouth in some wild dance. Her hands that undo my jeans and pull them down together with the boxer briefs.

She might be hungry for me. But I'm starving.

I undo her bra and pull it off, my mouth on one of her breasts right away.

These nipples—I fantasized about them. Sucked on them in my dreams so many times while I jerked off, trying to recreate that pool scene, that now I'm about to come as I grab both her breasts with my hands and suck on one, then the other, greedily, taking as much as I can in my mouth.

Her hands cover mine and squeeze harder.

I grunt.

Kat moans and arches her back, practically feeding her breasts to me. I lap at her nipples like I want to lick them off her skin, then graze them with my teeth.

"Archer," she whispers, then grabs my head again, her hands wildly raking through my hair. Her every touch feels amazing.

I let go of her tits and push her to lie down on the table, then hook my fingers into the strings of her panties and yank them down her legs.

I'm still on my knees, and it's a beautiful sight—her legs open to give me a view of her pussy. I hook my hands under her thighs and pull her toward me, bringing her pussy even closer, then push her legs wider.

"There, kitten," I whisper. "There's nowhere to run now."

She lifts her head to look at me—her lips parted, her eyes wild with need when I take the first lick.

ARCHER

THE FIRST TASTE OF A WOMAN...

That's when you know how you feel about her.

Whether you are just doing a favor and going down on her out of pity.

Or your testosterone spikes so high that you just want to mount her, though you barely know her name.

Or...

You know on a subconscious level that you will want to do it again and again, a hundred times. Because you want to drown in her scent. Lick her until her clit is swollen and too sensitive. Learn her tender spots. Hear her whimpers and moans. You want your fingers and tongue and cock in her—all at the same time—because *this* woman is luscious and delicious and something just clicks on an animal level, making you want to own her in bed.

Kat's pussy is divine. Her scent is a mix of her natural muskiness and whatever subtly sweet skin oil she uses. Her clit is just the right plumpness to make my tongue wanna rub against it endlessly. I didn't know I had a preference in pussy.

I push my jeans lower down my hips, giving my hard erection the freedom it's been seeking for the last twenty minutes. Stroking myself, I tease Kat, licking up and down her slit but slowly and without a rhythm.

"Archer..."

I love when she exhales my name like this, all hot and needy.

I straighten up and study her splayed wide apart for me.

No, she is not running away this time. She'll be lucky if she can walk by the end of the night.

Her pussy is so perfect it looks like one of O'Keeffe's paintings. It glistens with her juices, her thighs coated with them, shiny smears on my coffee table as I admire the sight while pumping my cock.

Kat raises her head, looking at me expectingly.

"Why did you stop?" Her abdomen rises and falls as she breathes heavily. My kitten is all stirred up, and I'm hard as steel, stroking myself slowly more to calm my cock than to get off.

"Tell me again how much you don't want me." I can't hold back a smile.

There is a flash of annoyance in her eyes.

"Because your body is clearly not getting the message."

I glide my hand along her thighs, my thumb tugging at her pussy lips but not touching where she wants it so bad.

"You are an open book, kitten."

"With many pages."

I actually have to hold back laughter. "Did I tell you speed reading is my forte?"

I give her plump clit a soft caress with my thumb.

Her thighs fall open wider. She is so shameless I might come just at the sight of her.

"Say it, coward," I tease her.

Her gaze hardens. "If you don't keep going, I'll kill you."

I can't help grinning, giving her another soft stroke with my finger, watching her squirm for more, as I keep pumping my dick.

"Is that what you learned on the streets of Bangkok? Teasing, running away, and hiding?" I press my thumb to her clit and hold it there. "What else did you learn?"

She starts pushing into my hand.

I lean and give her slit a long lick, but don't stop and keep going, rising above her, dragging my tongue up her belly, between her breasts, then up her neck and finish at her chin.

She grabs the Cuban links around my neck and yanks me down, kissing me impatiently.

But I pull back and drop to my knees again.

“You are so wet, kitten, there is a puddle on my coffee table,” I say with a smile as I kiss the inside of her thigh. Teasing her might be my favorite thing from now on.

“It’s just a table,” she murmurs.

“It’s an antique.” I plant little kisses on her skin, stroking my erection.

“Is that a problem?”

“No.” I lick the skin around her pussy, and she mewls. “Not if you tell me it’s because you are soaked for me. *Only me*, kitten.”

There’s a fucking ocean on my table. Anyone who’s ever been to this villa knows not to touch my coffee table. Days ago, this *would’ve* been a problem.

“This coffee table is imported from Iceland,” I explain and do a long lick on the spot where her legs connects with her body, “and made out of volcanic rock”—I repeat the motion on the other side—“from a volcano that erupted a thousand years ago.”

I drag my tongue along her center, licking up her juices.

Kat moans and lifts her hips off the table, pushing herself into my face.

“Ar-cher,” she whispers forcefully, grabbing my hair and pressing my face to her. “Fuck... Please.”

“Please what?” I flick her clit with the tip of my tongue, not enough to get her what she wants but enough to drive her crazy.

“I need to come.” She exhales. “Do something!”

A deep chuckle rumbles in my chest. I open my mouth wide and take as much of her sex in my mouth as I can, my tongue wiggling up her seam.

The wild thing whimpers.

I let go. “But you said you don’t want me, kitten.”

She arches under my touch. “Dammit! I lied!”

“You *are* a little liar, aren’t you? And a spy.”

“Archer, I want you. Please.”

“What was that?” I lick her one more time to tease her.

“I want you! Do something!”

I chuckle in satisfaction, then start licking her up and down.

I am being an animal. Like I took drugs. But I can’t help myself with her. Kat is so open that it’s like watching porn and being in it without anyone looking.

Playing out my fantasies? Sure. I’ve often limited myself, because despite not having shame about any dirty thing you want to do, it’s a turn-

off when your partner is too self-aware or horrified when you go off the beaten path.

Not Kat. She is lust incarnate, and it pumps me up like I'm a sex addict.

She bucks her hips at me with an exhale. "How much did it cost?" she asks with a cracked voice.

I raise my eyes to meet hers without stopping what I'm doing.

"The table..." She is turned on. Her gaze is unfocused. And she's still talking. This girl...

"Irrelevant." I kiss the inside of her thigh. "But the last time it had liquid on it"—I plant little kisses on her skin and feel my cock leak precum. I'm turned on as fuck—"was probably years ago." I keep nibbling the skin around her pussy, teasing her. "And look at this. Miss Ortiz dripping on an ancient rock, making history."

"Archer!" The needy thing almost rips my hair out, gripping it tight and pushing herself into my face.

My cock wants to spill on this ancient rock, too.

"This antique will see another eruption when you come, kitten. Raise your knees. I want you wide open," I say, pushing her one leg up.

Shamelessly—I grin—she hurriedly puts the heels of her feet on the edge of the cube, fully opening herself for my invasion. I let go of my cock, spread her pussy lips with my fingers, and start eating her.

Kat whimpers, loud in her pleasure—just like I like it. My cock moans for attention as it bobs in the air while I take care of Kat.

"Right there, yes," she instructs me. "Oh, fuck..."

"You are such a horny thing."

I lick her slowly and meticulously. Gradually, I increase the rhythm and pressure, listening to her pants that escalate to whimpers, then loud moans, her hands tugging at my hair.

In a moment, her repeated cries echo through the villa as she comes all over my tongue.

"Archer," she exhales, throwing her arms above her.

I straighten up, wiping my mouth—the wild thing almost drowned me.

Kat is beautiful even in this simple act of raking her hands through her hair that hangs off the table. She lifts herself on her elbows, wobbling, looking at the rock beneath her. "Anything else precious I should be aware of in this house?"

I grin, still on my knees between her legs, gliding my hands up and down her velvety thighs. "Me. *Only* me, kitten."

"Say it in Russian."

"*Ma-ja ka-ra-le-va*," I say in a low voice, chasing it with a chuckle.

"Yes," she whispers in response, her beautiful dark eyes scorching me all the way down to my cock.

I rise to my feet and kick off my jeans and boxers, then wrap my arms around her waist, and pick her up. Her legs swing around my waist, arms around my neck, as she kisses me, long and deep and slowly, licking her taste off my tongue.

She is so sporty, so fast, so sexy and borderline animalistic in her need.

I lay her down on the couch, untangle her legs from around me, and hook one over my shoulder.

"I like you wide open, kitten."

She smiles, her eyes twinkling through her half-closed slits.

I eat up the view, then bring my cockhead to her entrance and push inside.

"Fuuuuck," I exhale, heat surging through my cock and lower body, making my knees weak as I push inside her, deeper with every thrust, until I'm buried in her to the hilt. "Fuck," I blurt out, unable to hold back.

"What took you so long?" she whispers, pulling me down into the warm softness of her body.

"Was trying to save you from being ruined, kitten," I murmur, thrusting into her. "You are driving me insane."

I slide my hand between us and to her pussy and start rubbing it as my mouth fuses with hers in a kiss.

Kat rolls her hips, twisting herself onto my cock. So flexible. Her one leg over my shoulder. So impatient. Her one hand grabbing my hair so tightly that I growl in pain. The pain resonates with the insane lust that barrels through me as I start thrusting in her harder.

I need it.

She needs it.

My hand rubs her pussy like I'm trying to find another opening there, and in a moment, she tears her mouth off me, crying out in orgasm.

Her hand slides down to the base of my cock and cups my balls, tugging them. Pleasure bursts through my body.

Where the hell did this girl learn all the tricks?

My entire body throbs with need, and I start pounding her into the couch.

The tension is so high that in a moment, I blow inside her—so much for wanting to last forever. I keep going like a maniac for several hot seconds until my dick is on the verge of falling off, throbbing with the never-ending ecstasy, her pussy milking it for every last drop.

I'm weak and sweaty as I lean down to lick her nipple and kiss her breast before I collapse on top of her, burying my face in her neck.

"God," she exhales loudly, her leg slowly sliding off my shoulder.

"I can be," I murmur.

Her chest shakes in a chuckle as her hands stroke my shoulders. "I thought he would look different."

"Well, you got lucky. God is handsome, rich, and has a thing for you."

Another chuckle bursts out of her. "Yeah. That was... Pretty good, Mr. Chancellor."

Breathing heavily, I raise myself on my elbows to look at her beautiful grinning smug face.

"Pretty good?" I snort, then see her lips and can't help but kiss her briefly, letting go with a loud smacking sound.

"All right, all right." She rolls her eyes, still grinning, still stroking my shoulders, still turning me on even though I just fucked her. "It was great. I thought you said something about how long you can last inside me..."

Unbelievable. She will get back at me for every word I said.

Surprisingly, I don't care right now.

"Women's legs say a lot," I say, stroking her leg and admiring her beautiful body still splayed beneath me.

"Yeah? What do mine say?"

"They were over my shoulders, kitten. That means I like you."

She chuckles, stroking my torso.

Just when my eyes catch something.

My fucking Cuban links.

Around her neck...

I gape without a word.

"Something you like?" Kat smiles playfully, noticing my stare.

So, she lifted my chain...

"Looks good on you," I say, holding back my shock. Yes, this girl surprised me again.

“Does it?” The little thief licks her lips. “Wanna go again?”

I shake my head, unable to hold back a grin.

Yes. A dozen times. A hundred. There’s not a chance I’m getting her out of my system any time soon. I know it now. But I’ll take my time with her.

“Katura Ortiz, you are a savage.” I shift to lie down next to her on my back.

I need a minute. Suddenly, I’m out of breath, like I haven’t worked out every day for the last two weeks. And I’m in perpetual amazement.

The cool air feels good on my bare dick that’s semi-hard again. The dude has a thing for her. *I* have a thing for her.

Kat lazily stretches next to me. I turn my head and meet her gaze—satisfied? Searching? Hesitant? I can’t quite read it, not tonight. That’s a first.

“I like your lips, kitten,” I say, stretching my hand toward her face and brushing my thumb over her full lower lip. “I want them everywhere on me,” I say, enjoying seeing her slightly flustered, though she tries to hide it. “And there’s a lot of real estate to cover,” I add, brushing my thumb against her cheek. “With many unexplored gems.”

My chuckle makes her eyes burn like furnaces.

“To answer your question, yes,” I say.

She frowns. “Yes, what?”

“We’ll go at it again,” I say. “Just not yet. And if you dare disappear on me tonight, I’ll find you, lock you up in my bedroom, and fuck you until the fourth world war.”

“Awe, considering the political mood these days, that might not be for too long.” She drags the back of her hand down my torso, making me shiver in pleasure.

“You are mine.” I’m not playing with her right now. “I need to make it very clear that you are not fucking anyone but me on this island. We’ll keep up an appearance at work. But after work—”

“I’ve heard that before. And then you ignored me for days.”

“Oh, did you miss me? Why not say so, Miss Ortiz?”

Her hand stops right above my pubic area and starts going up, her eyes following it, avoiding looking at me.

“Maybe I was trying to be a lady.”

“Well, be a lady at work. But after work, when you are at my place, you can—” *Let go*, I want to say, but she cuts in.

“Be a savage?”

I laugh loudly, dropping my hand down. She is impossible. “Pretty much,” I say, shaking with laughter.

She frowns, her smile disappearing, raises herself on her elbows, and looks around, cocking her head.

“Kat?” I go quiet. “What is it?”

This sudden change in her is spooky.

She frowns even more. “Is someone else here?”

I rise on my elbow and glance around, taken aback for a second. “No. Why?”

She locks her gaze with mine, worry in her eyes. “I heard someone laugh.” She cocks her head to one side, and her frown deepens. “Surely it couldn’t be you.”

Her lips start spreading in a grin.

This fucking girl...

I wrap my arm around her waist and yank her flush against my chest.

“So the cactus blooms,” she murmurs.

“Ha. Ha.” I mock her.

For several seconds, we are quiet, just gazing at each other.

It’s slightly awkward. Like I was caught in a vulnerable moment. There’s that pendulum again—swinging like it does in polar directions, from angry to horny, from happy to awkward, from sexy to... intimate.

Nope.

Stop.

This is epigenetics at its finest—every experience, emotion, feeling gets engrained in your DNA and leaves a trace. Kat is doing too much of it lately.

I don’t like when she looks at me like this. Like she can see right through me. But I can’t look away—her gaze is hypnotic—and there is this momentary desire to unbraided her hair, see her completely undone, learn what she’s like when no one is watching.

“We made a mess on your couch,” she says, finally breaking the silence, her quiet voice etched with that seductive note again.

I lean and kiss her slowly, sucking on her lower lip. “Want to make more mess together? That can be your new job.” We are back to our comfort zone

“I have a job. I like sex as a hobby.”

I chuckle against her lips. She is so openly unapologetic.

“I’m thirsty,” she murmurs.

“Want a drink?”

Though the only thing I want to drink right now is her pussy, so wet for me that it can drown the Atlantic Ocean.

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KAT

I SIT UP AND LEAN ONTO THE BACK OF THE COUCH, RESTING MY CHIN ON MY hands, as I watch Archer walk across the living room to the bar.

He knows he looks fantastic naked. Flaunts it, too, the cocky bastard.

Big Dick minus his Cuban links.

I smile with pride.

“Corlo, the romantic setting,” he says as he pours himself a drink, neat.

I smile at the word.

We are not romantic. Not by a mile. We are horny, sexed up, off the leash. Romantic is for lovers. We just fuck. And judging by how it’s going, we’re great at it.

The overhead lights dim, and a row of the smaller ones along the floor perimeter come on, sinking the living room in a soft glow. And Archer’s naked body sinks into shadows. The light casts a soft glow on the side of his body, accentuating his muscles. He looks like a Greek statue in a night museum.

“What would you like?” he asks from the bar.

“Surprise me.”

“Preference in liquor?”

“Not really.”

“Sweet, bitter, sour?”

“Strong and sweet.” I want to add that I like my drinks like I like my men. But he is not sweet, is he? Except for right now. He is being a gentleman. His talented mouth is a bonus, plus his tongue that licks in a perfectly filthy way.

I bite back a smile, watching Archer walk back to the couch, carrying our drinks.

The first sip is delicious. “Wow. What is this?” Whatever he made for me is the most exquisite cocktail I’ve ever tried.

“Chocolate Negroni. Gin. A little spicy, a little tangy, a lot of flavor. Vermouth. Campari. Orange-chocolate syrup.”

He sits a little away from me on the couch, slightly slouching, his foot against the coffee table, which makes his leg, raised and bent at the knee, hide the parts that I would like to study and see in action again. But his muscled thighs and chest are just fine.

That’s the thing I am loving right now—him being so open about his body and mine. The way he looks at me. I don’t need to hide myself.

I take another sip of the drink, not sure I need more booze but loving it too. Everything about this evening, in fact.

“It tastes amazing, thank you,” I say, licking my lips.

“I used to be a good mixologist,” he says, tilting his head back against the couch and studying me.

“Yeah? What happened?”

“I stopped giving a fuck.”

There it is again. “Why is everything so... depressing in the way you talk about it?”

“Is it?”

“Often, yes.”

“Not everyone is always chirpy and happy.”

“I am not. But I don’t brood.”

“Right.” Archer smiles, taking a lazy sip of his drink that he holds loosely between his fingers. Even his fingers are perfect. Especially when they are between my legs. “What’s the most depressing day of your life?”

Well, now...

“You do like depressing stories, huh?” I chuckle. “Fine. The day my mom died.”

Silence follows. I am not elaborating on the topic. And I know he lost his mother in a freak accident. He stirred the wrong shit, though I’m too tipsy to get too emotional about it with a guy.

“My turn,” I say. “Did your father know about the nuclear attacks before they happened?”

Not a single muscle in his face moves. That’s how I know he is tense.

"I don't know," he replies.

"Bullshit. Rumor has it you brought Kai Droga to this island. So there must've been a reason, right?"

"That's the second question. It's my turn. What did you get the first assault charge in Pennsylvania for?"

Curious, huh? It's not in my file. Of course, not.

I look at the glass in my hand, then raise my eyes, meeting his challenging gaze.

He won't like this. He is fishing for a fun story? *Here we go, Mr. Chancellor.*

"For attacking a sheriff's son. Who..." I suck my teeth. That evening, the assault charge and probation that I got was the best outcome possible. "Who together with his three buddies cornered me behind a bar and tried to gang-rape me."

Silence seems like a mediator between us. Right now, it's heavy. His eyes are burrowing into me with a strange intensity that I can't quite explain.

"Are you sure you want to continue this game?" I ask with a soft smile. "Looks like we are not good at it."

Clearly, we are better off having sex than talking.

He takes another slow sip of his drink. "Tell me about Thailand. The fun stuff."

I chuckle, petting his gold chain around my neck. "Have you been?"

"Yes. Bangkok. Fun place."

"It is." Until it wasn't. "Food is great. People are even better."

He asks me more questions. I answer. We are just chatting, trying to stay away from deep water.

"How many countries have you traveled to?" I ask when we joke about the difference between Thailand and Taiwan.

"Over twenty, I think."

"Four." I raise my glass in the air and laugh. "I would've loved to see more if it weren't for the Change."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. Though you obviously still can go anywhere you want. Why don't you?"

"Work. No time. You think money gives you opportunities. Sometimes, it sucks the time out of you. You put things off for later, and suddenly years

go by.”

I like this easy talk. Archer is pretty tipsy. I guess that’s the reason we are so chilled tonight.

“You are too young to be so invested,” I argue.

“My father has too much power not to be.”

“Well, maybe you should’ve chosen a different path. Like football.”

He chuckles. “New England was declining.”

“Oh, no.” I make a sad face. “Patriots? Really?”

He shrugs. “Brady was the best quarterback until the shit hit the fan right before the Change.”

I cheer to him in the air with my glass. “Pittsburgh Steelers.”

He throws his head back. “No waaaaaay. Why? Roethlisberger?”

“Nah, Tomlin.”

“The coach?”

“He’s hot.”

He laughs again, and I love the sound of it. “That’s the only criteria?”

I shrug with a smile. “Why not?”

This seems too easy—discussing football, sitting naked on the couch and drinking cocktails, being around him when he lets go. We never got to talk before. Not about us. Everything we know about each other is from the files or other people. It’s unusual. Like reading about an exotic animal in a book and suddenly seeing it up close.

Maybe it’s the booze. Maybe it’s just an odd evening out. But he is not the Archer everyone talked about. Maybe that’s because we are cocooned in his place, and his phone hasn’t rung in a while. Work is somewhere else. So is the rest of the world.

His eyes roam along my body openly.

“You are staring,” I say teasingly.

“Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. Something you want? Or just admiring?”

I want to talk more, but it’s hard to keep the conversation when I’m buzzed, and we are naked, and I’m so aware of his body next to mine, only several feet away, that smile flickering on his lips, making my pussy clench with need.

“What is it that you drink all the time?” I ask.

“Armenian cognac.”

“Not a Hennessy fan?”

“Armenian stuff is the world’s best secret.”

“I wanna try.”

I tasted it on Archer when he kissed me. It’s peculiar. Strong. I want to know what he likes. Want more of *him*.

His eyes narrow like he is wondering if he should keep that cognac a secret. And there is something else. Mischief.

“Come.” He motions with his head, rising, his taut bare ass so delicious when he walks off that I would follow it anywhere.

He refills his glass as I stand next to him and study our reflections in the mirror behind the bar.

Both naked. Him a head taller than me. His skin lighter than mine. His body much stronger. His face serious, the jaw and cheekbones sharpened even more by the shadows. His hair a mess, strands falling onto his face—my doing.

Want to make more mess together?

His eyes flick up to meet mine in the mirror—it’s as if he can sense when I think about him. Which is constantly when he is around.

Tsk.

He takes a slow sip from his glass as he turns to face me. His eyes glide down my body. Another sip, our eyes meet over the rim, and he leans over to kiss me. Slowly. Sensually. His tongue licking between my lips as he does.

My body responds in seconds. I drag my fingertips along his chest, lower down the perfect V of his abs.

What happened to cognac-tasting?

Except now I don’t want cognac. I want him again.

He pulls away and, not taking his eyes off me, dips his fingers into his glass, then brings them to my breast and circles my nipple.

My mouth falls open just slightly.

I look down at the drops glistening on my skin in the dim light, and Archer bends and draws a circle with his tongue around my nipple.

This is hot.

And his smile is even hotter when he pulls away, licking his lips.

“Wanna try?”

He dips his fingers in the glass, then his hand disappears between us.

I break the eye contact to look down—at his fingers brushing his cock.

Oh, fuck. So that’s how we gonna roll?

My gaze flickers up at him. His is narrowed at me, playful, devilish when he says, “It’s really good. Go for it.”

The cognac or...

Yes, I want it all.

I want to bite back with a clever remark. But Archer is not pushy. He wants to play. And guess who is the number one player?

Slowly, I get down on my knees in front of him.

He wants a blowjob? I’ll make sure he will never forget it.

His cock is long and thick, perfect and pointing at me like a gun. I lean over, stick my tongue out just a little, and give his shaft a quick lick, then lean back on my heels and look up at him. “I didn’t quite get the taste.”

His lips stretch in a smile as he dips his fingers in the glass again and brings them, dripping, to his cock, smearing the liquid along its length.

This time, I stick out my tongue and, locking my gaze with his, run my tongue slowly all the way up his length, tugging at his tip with my lips.

I’m dripping down my thighs, wanting at the same time to fuck him and give him the best blowjob of his life—not that mechanical stuff he gets from other girls.

I was too young for this stuff when I lived in Bangkok. But hanging out with ladyboys, in the back rooms of ‘ping pong shows,’ taught me a lot. I heard a lot. Saw even more.

It was Jonshu, my *kathoe*y bestie, who told me that guys like being taken care of just like women—slowly and thoroughly.

“Blowjob is not a marathon. Unless you are working, of course. It’s a trip. It’s art. You want to make a guy come fast—find his prostate and do that in seconds. That’s just anatomy, babe. Blowjob is as visual pleasure as it is sensual.”

I do just that. I take Archer’s cock in my hand and press it against his abdomen.

Little kisses along its shaft—he exhales in pleasure.

Little licks along his length, my lips tugging at the skin that’s soft and smooth over his steel hardness—a grunt escapes his throat.

I slather his dick like it has the most exquisite flavor I’ve ever tried—his tip leaks precum. I lick it off, then trail kisses and licks down his shaft to where the skin is looser and more sensitive.

He is motionless with a drink in his hand. The other hand loosely hovers next to my head like he doesn’t know what to do—either to grab me or grab

himself and jerk off.

I still hold his beautiful cock pressed to his belly. I lick the middle finger of my right hand and cup his balls, gently pushing my finger deeper behind them.

He's always so self-controlled. Except for the little moments with me, when he enjoys it so much that his body gives it away.

I'm gonna do this slowly to see if he can lose his dominant mask.

In a moment, this beautiful man is gonna moan.

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ARCHER

I SWEAR THIS GIRL IS A COCK-WHISPERER.

My cock is in shock, in awe, and is utterly in love with her right now.

Kat's lips and tongue do some kind of wicked dance around it, teasing, nibbling, kissing. Which does not even qualify as a blow job—yet—but I hold my breath and all my willpower not to blow at the sight of her on her knees, working me like she's auditioning for a porn gig.

She kisses the base of my shaft, tugging gently at the sensitive skin in that spot, then brings her lips lower and gives my balls a playful lick.

I bite my bottom lip in a constant need to say, "Fuck," my cock throbbing with pleasure.

I set the drink down and start stroking her head.

She swirls her tongue on one side of my balls, then does the same to the other.

I moan.

God, she gets me so hard!

"Kitten," I whisper, chasing it with other words that leave my mouth unaware.

Her fingers gently squeeze and massage the tip of my cock that she presses to my abdomen. Her other hand is somewhere between my legs, one finger going dangerously farther than my dignity allows.

But my dignity is taking a backseat, because my balls are so heavy they ache, and the only thing that matters is Kat's tongue, like a little flame, licking fire onto my cock.

I suck in a harsh breath, wanting to ram my cock in her mouth and blow in seconds. It's an instinct. A need for fast release.

But I hold back—I might never get another chance to have this experience again.

Kat's lips reach my tip, and she takes me in her mouth.

I can't hold back a grunt.

"Kitten, you are a cocktease," I whisper, my body melting.

She is not taking much of me. Just the tip, her hand working the shaft methodically. But she sucks on it softly, all the while her tongue doing some wild pirouettes, dipping into the slit in the center. If I made that bet about how long I can last—yeah, I'd lose.

"I want to come," I say in a voice I don't recognize—cracked and raspy and needy as she works me with her talented mouth.

Fuck me dead.

"Kat, I *need* to come," I say louder when she pulls away and stops.

Her lips are swollen. Her gaze on me is wicked, though I wish I didn't dim the lights so much so I could read every emotion in it.

I feel dizzy, my entire body tingling with want.

"Ask me," she says softly, not a trace of a smile on her lips, just that intensity as she keeps her eyes on mine.

It might be a dare. Or a trick. I don't care. Her hands don't move. My hands still absently stroke her hair. The tip of my cock points at her mouth which is only inches away. I want it like a shy schoolboy wants the first kiss.

And I want *her* to finish me off.

"Please?" I say, not believing my own fucking mouth.

Her tongue darts out, licking my tip, her eyes not leaving mine. Mine dart to her lips that start rhythmically sucking on my tip, and in a moment, I gush like a broken tap into her mouth, grunting and moaning and making some sounds that I never thought I was capable of producing.

Only her brows twitch a little as her head ducks to swallow all I had in store for her. Then she releases my cock, kisses its tip, and slowly rises to her feet.

She kissed the tip of my cock...

I think I might blush.

Her lips twitch in a tiny smile when she says, "That was some pretty good cognac."

I grin, utterly smitten, palm her hot face, and kiss her deeply.

“Where did you come from, kitten?” I murmur into her mouth.

“Your dreams.”

No shit.

Kat tastes like me, and I swear, this rails me up even more. She didn’t take even half of my length in her mouth but blew my mind.

I let go of her and gently turn her to face the bar mirror as I stand behind her. I pull her hair to the back and caress her tits.

They are beautiful, with perfect nipples. She is gorgeous, and I haven’t even seen her with makeup on.

Kat tilts her head back onto my shoulder, her eyelids drooping.

“I was right about you,” I say, kissing her neck and playing with her breasts.

“That you’ll fuck me again?”

“That your mouth is good at more than smart comments.”

I slide my hand up her chest to take her chin and turn it so I can kiss her. Kissing her after what she’d done with her tongue on my cock almost feels like a privilege.

My other hand slides down her front and between her legs. She is soaked—I’m sure down to her knees.

“You are so wet for me, kitten,” I murmur, my dick already hardening at the thought of being inside her. That fucker is hungry for her like it’s been celibate for decades.

I slide my hand around her hip to her ass, gently spread her asscheeks, and slide my finger to her back entrance.

Kat tenses up.

I start rubbing it gently, teasing only, to see if she likes that.

She breaks the kiss.

“Archer...”

I press my finger harder.

She tenses even more.

“What’s the matter, kitten?” I ask softly, studying her face.

Back door was never appealing to me. Something to try but nothing to write home about.

But there is one thing I want with Kat—to take something from her no one else did. I might be tipsy. Might be too carried away with all the sex

stuff in the last two hours. I haven't even done drugs, and I feel high on her. But I want to do all shades of filthy to her. *With* her.

Kat doesn't look so excited. She bites her lip and wiggles her butt away from my fingers, chuckling nervously.

"Awe, my kitten is shy."

I don't know why it's such a turn-on, but I just found something that makes my kitten blush, and my dick is now in full-on attack mode.

"We'll leave it for a special occasion," I murmur as I slide my fingers between her legs, stroking her pussy.

She doesn't answer. So that's a yes. I'll play with that idea more later.

I push into her with my body, bending her just slightly forward until she presses her hands against the edge of the bar and sticks her butt out. Her head is tilted back, eyes closed, and she rolls her hips against my hand as I stroke her folds.

Kat is mesmerizing. I have plenty of experience with girls. I've had ones who surprised me and ones who shocked the hell out of me. Virgin, slutty, shy, nutcases, traditional, lesbians, S&M lovers, freaks, and kinky from A to Z. You name it—I had it.

But the way Kat feels is different. When we don't talk, we engage so easily. We fuck like we were created for ultimate mating. Kissing, petting, being naked next to each other like we were born Adam and Eve.

It's unexplainable. And as long as we don't discuss any heavy shit or work or the past—seems like most things—it's perfect. We can just fuck.

By now Kat is rocking back against my hand. So I bring the tip of my erection to her entrance and thrust into her several times until I'm as deep as I can go, and she makes this half-exhale half-mewling sound, too gentle for someone like Kat, that drives me crazy and makes me even hornier.

I stop.

This feels like ultimate power over her—her sheathed onto my cock, beautiful and needy, her skin glowing in the faint light, her reflection in the mirror etched with shiny flakes of light reflections from the liquor bottles.

And me. Behind her. In the shadows. Like a serpent.

I widen my stance and position my hands against the edge of the bar counter, on each side of her.

"I want you to fuck me, kitten," I murmur into her ear and kiss it gently. "You are so good at it."

She is. Her sex drive matches mine. I just came, but the wild thing is burning. I can tell by the way her body moves—almost fluid, loose and flexible like a cat. The way she starts rolling her hips, pushing her ass into me. The way she is sheathing onto my cock, pulling away and sinking into it again.

“That’s it, kitten, nice and slow,” I murmur in her ear and get a soft moan as a response.

It’s hard to hold still when all I want is to fuck her endlessly—on top, from behind, against the wall, in the pool, sideways, in the shower, on my gym bench.

But I love watching her take what she wants, though she’s getting tired, panting and grinding onto me.

Awe, I wore my wild thing out.

“You want help, kitten?” I whisper into her ear.

She doesn’t answer like I’m not here.

Wrong question.

“You want me to rub your pussy?” I flick her earlobe with my tongue.

“Yes,” she exhales, then widens her stance as I reach over her hip and slide my hand to her wet cunt.

If there was a warm ocean that I wanted to drown in it would be called Katura Ortiz.

I can’t hold still anymore.

I prop my one foot against the small drawer on the level with my hip. My other hand squeezes her breast, and I fuck her slow and good, wrapped around her like a spider.

Her moans soak the air when she comes, clenching so hard around my cock that I come in just seconds after her, grunting into her neck, both of us sweaty and out of breath as we stand still in an embrace for a short while.

“I need a shower.” Kat turns and sways, and I steady her with my arm around her waist.

“You okay?”

“Your cum is dripping down my thighs,” she says, her voice shaky.

I burst into laughter and pull her toward me again.

“Wanna go one more time?” I tease her, nuzzling her damp cheek.

Her eyes widen in slight panic, hands pushing against my shoulders. “Hell no. I wanna be able to walk tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to.” I’m totally messing with her. “Come on.” I take her hand and pull her to follow me. “We are taking a shower and going to bed.”

“I’ll go home. It’s fine.”

Nah-huh. Not happening. “You are staying here. For early breakfast.”

“Alma is making breakfast again?” she muses as we walk into the bathroom.

“That’s second breakfast.” I turn toward her and wink.

She snorts.

The shower starts hissing as we step in.

Kat chuckles. “I was wondering why someone needs four showerheads.”

“Corlo, turn on moonlight setting.”

The shower goes dimmer, bringing out soft-green and blue lights. Kat grins, looking up and around, under the streams of water.

Her excitement is contagious. Who knew I could impress a girl with the moonlight shower setting?

We dry off afterward and walk into the bedroom.

“Any tricks in the bedroom?” she asks, her voice soft and sleepy.

“Just me, kitten.”

I can’t help but smile. This is the most fun I’ve had with a girl in years. Kat makes me forget about the world outside. On the island that caters to the most spoiled of the world’s elite, it’s an achievement. It’s an even bigger achievement that we are so comfortable around each other. That always changes when we put our clothes on.

“Are you a cuddler?” Kat asks as she flips the bedcover and sheets open.

“Let’s not push it, yeah?” I hope she doesn’t think this is something I do all the time. I haven’t had a girl sleep over at my place since... Yeah, since Anna left right after the Change. And the only reason I want Kat to stay is that I know myself—I’ll wake up in the morning hard as a rock and thinking about doing her. “I hope you don’t snore.”

“Whatever.”

She drops her towel and gets in bed, naked, not even asking for a change of clothes.

Under the sheets, several feet away from her, I say, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she echoes, and the lights go off, sinking the room into darkness.

“Wait,” she murmurs in the dark, “did the virtual assistant just sense that someone got in bed?”

I chuckle. “No, it reacts to the word *goodnight*.”

“Is that because there is no one else here to say it to?” she asks in a sleepy voice.

I don’t answer.

She might be joking. But sadly, she is right.

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KAT

I WAKE UP TO A BRIGHTLY LIT ROOM. IT'S WAY PAST DAWN, WHICH IS TOO late for me. There is a heavy warm body pressing against me from behind. A strong hold around my waist—Archer's.

I smile.

We are both naked, and there is no sheet between us. This feels too intimate. And... nice.

I try to move, but the hold gets tighter.

"Running away again?" Archer's soft voice sends a pleasant shiver through me. Who knew Mr. Chancellor could be soft?

"I thought you weren't a cuddler," I murmur with a smile, stroking his arm. Now that he is awake, I wouldn't mind a different kind of cuddling.

"I'm not," he murmurs, pressing even harder against me. "You were humping me in your sleep and threw your leg over me."

I snort. "So not true."

"So is. I had to restrain you if I wanted a chance to stay on this bed."

"Uh-huh. Archer Crone, a cuddler. If only people knew..."

"No one will believe you," he murmurs and bucks his hips at me, his hardness pressing against my lower back. "Do you see what your wiggling does?"

His murmur is low and raspy, hot against my neck. His hand leaves my waist and slides to cup my breast.

"Poor thing, you must've suffered all night," I whisper, pushing my ass against his hardness.

"Yes. You are hell, kitten. I need to be reimbursed for my troubles."

His hand slides between my legs to check if I'm ready. I was born ready for a man like him. It's his hard tip next that presses against my entrance, and he slides inside me, both of us exhaling in relief.

"I need this, kitten," he murmurs, fucking me. "Otherwise, I'll be hard all day."

He thrusts in slowly as I melt under his touch, little whimpers escaping my throat.

"You need this too, wild thing. You get so wet for me..."

I know.

"Even in the office," he whispers.

The bastard knows everything. "Then stop staring at me through the window like an owl. All day long."

He thrusts harder into me, making me cry out, because it feels good.

"You keep that attitude," he grunts as he keeps thrusting into me in that slow delicious way, "and I'll fuck you in my office just to keep your pretty mouth shut."

"I thought we said no office."

"So I avoid being there," he says, thrusting a little faster. "For your sake. Otherwise, I'd have to fuck you every few hours."

His words work like triggers. The climax, sweeping over me instantly, is soft and deep. I turn my face into the pillow and moan, clenching around his cock until he releases into me and stills for a moment, breathing slowly.

"Alma made breakfast," Archer announces as he gets off the bed right away and pads to the bathroom. That fast? "I'm jumping in the shower. You can join," he says without turning.

He talks like I'm a usual breakfast menu now. Like it's part of my job.

I'm not sensitive about things like this. Usually...

I try to figure out what bothers me about his tone but abandon the idea and tiptoe to the living room, hoping there is no cleaning lady.

The most annoying thing about casual hookups is overstaying your welcome.

So I don't.

My clothes are scattered on the floor around the coffee table. I find everything but my panties, curse, throw the clothes on, and leave the villa.

It's already hot outside when I stop by my bungalow, change into a bikini and sports clothes, and head down to the beach.

The ocean is beautiful, and as I float on my back, rocking on the waves, I stare at the blue sky and think about last night.

Back on the beach, my phone beeps.

It's Archer.

I feel butterflies in my stomach.

It's a picture—my panties, on his coffee table.

What was that story about that coffee table?

I bite my lip. I wish I could send him a picture of my butt and ask him if that's where the panties belonged.

But my phone doesn't have a camera. Dang it.

Me: Care to put it back where it belongs?

Look at you, Kat, hunting for another lay.

Archer: It's a long and sophisticated process. Might take all night.

Me: Sophisticated? We are not talking about you, are we?

Archer: I'm keeping this. Next time I'll hide your clothes so you don't run away without a proper goodbye.

I grin. Whether at the innuendo of *proper* or the fact that there is next time.

The guy is driving me insane.

He is ice and fire, cold in public but borderline possessive when he is alone with me.

My queen.

I laugh, remembering the king of the island on his knees between my legs, talking Russian. It will be hard to keep my face straight in the office.

But there's something else I want to do before heading to work.

I dial my guy at HR. "I need to know what security booth O'Shea is working right now. If he is."

He gives me the info, and my heart starts pumping as I head to the road that goes around the resort, circling past post 43, the Eastside entrance.

The sun is rising, and I've already worked up enough sweat, jogging up the hill and toward the eastern post. I narrow my eyes on the checkpoint at a distance, then keep my eyes down as I approach at a light jogging pace, then cry out loudly and stop, holding one of my knees with both hands.

"Shit," I murmur and stand bent over for a moment until I hear slow heavy footsteps.

"You alright, miss?"

I raise my eyes.

That British accent. Jacob O'Shea. Age thirty-seven. 5'6.

Looks and sounds about right.

Tactical pants, duty belt, vest over a black t-shirt, sunglasses that disguise his eyes. Though, unlike his file picture, he has a several-day stubble.

"Just... Something with my knee," I say, wrinkling my nose.

I straighten up and wave my hand at him with a smile and start walking. "It's just—"

I cry out, faking pain.

"*Blin, shto za fignia*," I curse in Russian, rubbing my knee. *Dammit, what the hell.* "It's a pain, you know?" I roll my eyes at him.

Slowly, he tips his sunglasses onto his forehead, his eyes locked on mine, smile fading. "What was that?"

"What?" I smile broader.

"You just said something." He takes a step closer, his eyes drilling into me with more danger than I'd like to see.

I frown. "Nothing. My knee. It's a pain in the ass, you know?"

The guards don't have cameras on their phones. He can't snap a picture of me.

As per the timeline, Milena Tsariuk was in the States when he was in Russia. Pictures and reality are two different things. You strip makeup off a doll, and no one will recognize her in real life. And Milena Tsariuk was a doll. If this guard thinks I can speak Russian, it only plays in my favor. If he has any connection to Aleksei Tsariuk, he'll try to find me.

"How long have you been on this island?" he asks, taking another step closer, giving away his interest. And obviously not in my injured knee. "Haven't seen you before."

I'm reeling him in, and my heart pounds at the thought that I might've hit the jackpot.

"Oh, you know. Too long for my patience. I don't like to be out in public much," I say.

"Why is that?"

His friend is getting interested too, taking slow steps toward us. I'm not sure if it's Cunningham, his buddy he joined Ayana security with or not. I need to check his schedule.

"I don't like people prying," I say, then feign concern and look around awkwardly, still rubbing my knee. "Have a good day." I straighten up and

start walking away, then only several feet away, trip over gravel on purpose and murmur, "*Tshiort.*" *Dammit.* Loud enough for them to hear.

"Hey!" he calls, making me turn. "What's your name again?"

I shake my head and look away.

But when I look back a minute later, the two guards still stand in the middle of the road, watching me.

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ARCHER

EVERYTHING KAT DOES OUTSIDE THE BEDROOM RUBS ME THE WRONG WAY. So does her sneaking away.

Alma was grinning from ear to ear when I stomped into the kitchen mad when I realized Kat had left. I ate the fucking toast just to make the older lady happy. She lights up like a Christmas tree ever since I brought her back to the villa to cook for me. She doesn't have children, and the first morning she was back—after that snake bite and a month after my binge and me dismissing the cooks—she acted like she found her long-lost son.

The little spy might have left, but she left a present behind—her red panties, tucked between the couch pillows.

My cock got hard at the sight, the feel of them, crispy from being soaked the night before, the memory of Kat's pussy wet for me, her tongue on my dick, her sweet ass flickering in the dim light of the living room as she walked around naked the night before.

I contemplated jerking off with her panties wrapped around my cock, then took a picture and sent it to Kat.

She acts like she doesn't give a shit about me. But I know she does.

What bothers me is that she is being a coward and refuses to admit it in the daylight. How is it even possible to date a girl like that?

Whoa.

The word slipped through my mind by accident.

Dating is not an option. Kat is here for a short ride. We would cut each other's throats if we were in close proximity for too long. Plus, I'm not on the market.

But I can't remember the last time a girl completely took over my attention.

So, no office for me today.

Not a chance I can focus on anything when the wild thing is flaunting her beautiful body right outside my door when all I can think of is her splayed on my coffee table.

I work from home, shutting myself in my office for hours.

It's evening when I tear my eyes off the computer screen, finish with emails that can't be sent off to the assistants, and finally emerge from the cave.

There is one thing I've been avoiding for weeks, but it's time we had a conversation.

Stuffing my face with some healthy salad with fruit and nuts that Alma made, I call Raven and Marlow to summon them to my villa for a talk.

Those two are like yin and yang.

Marlow wears a long-sleeved shirt and loose sports pants when he shows up half an hour later, looking like a surfing magazine cover model. Not a word about the restaurant episode.

Raven is like Sid Vicious who grew up and cleaned up his act. All black clothes, jeans, long sleeves, and Converse when he strolls in minutes after Marlow.

"Remember that Russian mobster ordeal a year ago?" I ask Raven as I make us drinks.

The sun outside is setting over the ocean in the distance, but I don't close the blinds. With my guys here at my crib, this reminds me of the first days after the nuclear attacks. When we still had hope that ten nukes would cap the world war. We didn't know what was happening until the connection was restored. So we sat just like this, day after day, mostly at my villa, and waited for the news as if it were from a different planet. The war never reached Zion. Maybe that's why I still love sunsets.

It's about time I told Raven about the new development and Katura.

Raven deals with Butcher, the self-proclaimed Port Mrei mayor, the port itself, and the most important imports to Zion. By most important, I mean weapons, medication, and anything that requires special connections at customs on the mainland. Of all people, Raven should be aware that there might be people looking to sabotage our security again.

He doesn't look surprised when I'm done talking.

“So Katura is a double agent sort of thing?” he asks, slowly swirling a drink in his hand.

“Something like that.”

“That sporty girl? Pretty? With braided hair? The one at the beach every morning?” Even Raven noticed her. “So, she’s not that good at spying, huh?”

“She’s good. Not her fault her cover was blown. Actually, just a lucky circumstance. Tsariuk said to Amir’s father something about Navy SEALs. And it just clicked in my mind.” Even mobsters occasionally have a big mouth. “Ask Marlow for her file so you know who you are dealing with. Taking that into an account, we really need to step up with security issues. Marlow, do another briefing on security and contractors. There is no reason why the thugs from town were able to disrupt our surveillance a month ago. And for what reason—that’s what I want to know.”

Work used to bring satisfaction. But when you have more money than God, even something you used to love can become a burden.

Zion was supposed to be a party place, owned almost entirely by my father. Two years after the Change, it’s collected the brightest minds in the field of genetic engineering and biochemistry. This requires high security and surveillance. And now it’s requiring too much of my time.

“Then,” Raven says in that same voice like he is giving the most boring report of his life, “we should really try to find out what the deal with Milena Tsariuk is. You said that girl, Katura, is looking for the info. She is an amateur, I assume.”

“She has her methods. Her dad is not.”

“Who’s her dad?”

I briefly explain to Raven. “He is getting intel about any red flags in contractors’ files.”

Raven is quiet. Suspicious—I know Raven.

“Alright,” he says. “Let that girl do her job, see what her father can find. If there’s nothing in the security employee files, we’ll take a different kind of action.”

“What action?”

“The spring-breakers, once again.”

“Right,” I say irritated. “I know the Deene people. Everyone else—females—there are only thirty or so of them. Besides the ones my dad sent here before the attacks. Shit. Right. Those ones.”

My head is already throbbing from this Tsariuk business. The only good part about is that it brought the beautiful spy to Zion.

“I’ll look into it,” Marlow says, getting up. His restlessness is suspicious. “Well, as soon as I sort out the move with the Outcasts.”

“Right.” I nod, tensing up at the mention.

That’s the new development.

The Outcasts had a meeting with Maddy and Bo and voted—or whatever they call that silly procedure—to come to Ayana. That’s the true power—letting someone believe they have a choice.

“I don’t want to be any part of it. It’s all on you, Marlow,” I say.

It’s happening in two days. And though I tell myself that I don’t care, I clench with unease every time I think about it. This is just one more headache. But that also means Droga is gonna be by my side.

“The move,” I tell Marlow, “and the arrangements. You have clearance to all the info and their financial records. I won’t show my face to them for the next several days. I don’t want to, and I don’t need any more drama.”

“Understood, Arch,” Marlow says.

In a minute, both he and Raven are gone, and I stand by the window, watching the dark-blue night sky pushing the pink strip of sunset into the horizon.

I understand Marlow’s anxiousness. He is excited about the Eastsiders. I, on the other hand, want them all gone. Except for Droga and his girl. Ty and his lady are fine, too. Maddy and Bo—I need them. The rest can fuck off from my island.

I know one thing that would make this island and my life safer and stop the attacks on the surveillance.

I failed once, but it doesn’t hurt to try.

So I call Dad.

ARCHER

CALLING THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, EVEN ON A PRIVATE LINE, EVEN being his only son, is a struggle. It's the sad truth. It takes two hours for him to call me back.

If he were a normal dad, we would've had a chat about random stuff.

"How are you doing, son?" he does ask.

But as soon as I say, "I'm alright. How is it going?" he is already talking to someone else next to him, not listening to me.

"What's happening?" he asks when he finally notices my silence.

"Was thinking about the idea of taking Gen-Alpha public."

That's a sure way to get his attention. That's a topic we discussed before and the one he absolutely hates.

"Are you high?" His sudden snappy tone is an indication.

"I'm not. I know it doesn't fit with your plans."

"My plans? Son, are you drunk? My plans are *your* plans and the *board's* plans."

"I know, I know. But I was thinking lately..." I take a deep breath.

Conversations with my dad are never easy. He won't give in to anything that's not in his interest. Even if it comes from his own son. Not that he cares about me any more than his assistants, one of which he's probably fucking. Typical.

"I did some calculations and an alternative business plan for the next five years—"

"There is no alternative, Archer," he cuts me off sharply and barks something at the person next to him. "What is this nonsense?"

“Taking the drug public, dropping the price, making it accessible through healthcare. Ninety-five countries. In a five-year projection that’s almost as much money as—”

“It’s exclusive. This is *not* about money, and you know it.”

Fuck! He never listens.

It’s about politics and power and Big Pharma. I’m not trying to be a Good Samaritan here—I simply want out. I don’t want the responsibility.

“Stop with this nonsense, Archer. You are smarter than that.”

He doesn’t get it. Never will. He and I haven’t had a normal conversation outside work in two years.

“Son, I gotta go. Did Amir bring up something like that?”

“It has nothing to do with Amir.”

“Of course not. I didn’t think so.”

Dad hangs up before I get a chance to say goodbye.

Whatever.

He is so caught up in politics that he forgot what it’s like to live and only knows how to barrel through life in his bullet-proof Maybach with an army of assistants and secretaries and the White House staff, agendas, occasional blowjobs, late-night drinking, and high blood pressure.

People like him never stop. Moreover, they think their life is worth thousands of others. It took me two years and replaying the conversation before that fateful Spring Break to realize it.

“Take your best crew to Zion for Spring Break,” Dad says. “Have the time of your life.”

“I can have the time of my life in Tulum,” I snap.

“No. Take the private jet. Go to Zion. I own the resorts. Splurge. I’m paying.”

“The generosity...” I smirk.

“Do what I fucking say,” he snaps.

His words feel like bullets. Dad never snaps. Not since the year of depression after what happened to Mom and Adam. He rarely loses his cool. So this is a red flag.

His gaze chills, but my insides start turning.

“Wanna join us?” I ask bitterly. “Maybe you can bring one of your mistresses.”

He doesn’t flinch. “I’m arranging for about twenty other people to go, my friends’ kids.”

“What is this? The world’s elite’s Thanksgiving? If I’m going to party, I’m going with my crew.”

“This time you do precisely what I tell you to do, Arch. That best friend of yours, Kai Droga. Take him.”

Now I laugh in his face. He knows that Droga and I don’t talk after what went down during the Block Party two years ago and the fire. We are enemies. And that’s an understatement. I haven’t seen the dude in over a year.

“Are you losing it?” I ask, gaping at Dad.

He takes a step closer, then another one. Slowly. Like a predator. I might be tall and strong, but my dad is taller, heavier, and is the most intimidating man I know. The Secretary of Defense has the ability to make even the most powerful people shudder in unease under his gaze.

And right now, something in his eyes makes me swallow hard.

“Droga was your best friend.” His voice is low but so cold that it could freeze fire in seconds.

I could lie and say, fuck that bastard. Droga traded our friendship for a girl.

Yet, my father knows, always fucking knows, what I think.

My silence is my answer, though I hate it.

He nods. “Get Droga on that island for Spring Break. Any way you can. And anyone you remotely care for.”

Something is wrong. “What’s going on?”

Instead of an answer, he starts walking out, already talking to someone on the phone.

I’ve come back to that conversation a hundred times after the Change. If I knew what he knew, I would’ve taken my friends’ entire families to save them from what was to come. Instead of taking fucking bimbos and models and people I only kept around for their pretty faces and important connections.

But the darkest thought is not that. The worst one is that my own father knew that in a matter of weeks, millions would be dead. And said nothing. Not even to me. That’s how I realized that if a job is more important than your loved ones—fuck that job.

“Corlo, lock the doors, dim the lights,” I order and go to the bar to make myself a drink.

I want to be alone tonight. It's become my permanent state. I want to drink. I want to remember the moments that made me happy.

When I had a family.

When Dad cared.

When Droga and I traveled across Mexico with no worry about the future.

"Corlo, play 'One Of These Nights' by Eagles."

It used to be one of Mom's favorites. She used to tell Adam and me stories about how she and Dad met when he was in the army. He used to be romantic.

"He wanted to change the world," she said.

The music starts trickling through the speakers.

I walk to the desk on the other side of the room and press my fingertip to the scanner. The drawers open with a soft pneumatic sound—my treasure chest.

There are a few family pictures in one of them.

Dad, Mom, little Adam and me, twelve. On the beach. All smiles.

We used to smile so much. And laugh. I forgot what Dad's laughter sounds like.

This song always brings the best memories, followed by the darkest ones that have haunted me for years.

Adam stares at me from under his brows, pouting as he stands Mom's favorite 1953 Corvette and she revs up the engine. "Let's go, boys!"

"Arch, you are a shithead," my little bro swears. "You ditching us again?"

I make big eyes. "I can't go right now," I whisper.

"Liar."

"Listen, Adam, I'm gonna go meet Emily."

He wrinkles his nose.

Yeah, twelve, and I was already chasing skirts.

"Always girls." Adam playfully punches my shoulder with his little fist, then lights up right away like he always does—so easy to forgive. "Don't worry. I got your back."

He gives me that crooked wink of his as he gets in the car with Mom.

"Where's Archer?" she asks.

"He's not going."

"What do you mean he's not going?"

I grin.

In a moment, they are gone.

The next time I see them is at the funeral, the two coffins too out of place on a bright sunny day when we bury Mom and Adam.

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KAT

MARLOW'S BEEN MISSING FOR TWO DAYS. HE NEVER TOLD ME WHAT DAY the Outcasts were moving to the Westside.

So his message arrives out of the blue as I sit at my desk at work.

Marlow: The Outcasts are boarding the boats on the Eastside.

What?

He doesn't pick up when I call.

Marlow: I'll call you back in a bit.

How am I the last person to know?

I dial Kai, then Maddy, but no one answers.

Whatever, busy bees. I bite my lip in disappointment.

I can barely sit straight in my seat when, two hours later, Archer walks into the Center and, without acknowledging me, goes straight to his office.

Another minute later, I knock on his door and barge in. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He looks up at me, lazily checking out my outfit. "Tell you what?"

"That the Eastsiders are moving in?"

He's wearing a long-sleeved shirt, sleeves pushed up. It hugs his torso perfectly. Only several days ago, which seems like an eternity, it was rubbing against my breasts as he panted away on top of me.

I've missed him.

He doesn't seem too happy. Never says much anyway. Every word is on point like he doesn't have time. Which is a pity. I'd like to spend more time with him. To hear him laugh as he did back at his villa the night we spent

together. To see him as happy as he looks in the pictures from Mexico with Droga.

I wonder what hurts him, what soothes him. I wonder a lot about him, and that's a bad sign. Because I've never wondered so much about any other man in my life. Archer is a unicorn, a bit grim and with dark habits but subtle charm when he lets go, and that ropes me in slowly but deeply.

Days went by, but nothing changed. Like the way my pulse spikes when I'm in Archer's presence. The way my body tingles under his gaze. The way I try to play cool but my body feels like it's on fire.

I only now notice a Rubik's cube in his hands.

I stretch my hand—he passes it to me.

We often have a hard time clicking when we talk, but without words, we understand each other perfectly.

"Marlow didn't tell me anything," I say, trying to hide my disappointment as I'm messing with the cube. No one really cares about me on Zion, I get it. Not even Archer. But it would be nice to be in the loop.

"It's a bit intense right now," Archer says with unusual softness in his voice. He is not himself today.

"No shit." I finish messing with the cube and pass it back to him. "So they are moving in, huh?"

"So they are."

He starts playing with the cube, not taking his eyes off me. They flicker down to his gold chain still around my neck. Margot noticed it the other day, and I swear, she looked like she had a heart attack.

"Are you not gonna be there?" I lean onto Archer's desk with my hands, studying him.

I want to be closer. But it seems to be a pattern—we are either too close, having brainless sex, or too far apart.

Archer looks way better than weeks ago. Healthier. He hasn't called me in days. Hasn't texted. Hasn't shown up at the Center. Seeing him is like a breath of fresh air. My body feels alive in his presence, and I feel even more helpless at wanting him so badly.

Archer slowly leans back in his armchair with that smirk on his face that I haven't seen in a while. "You know the history of us with the Eastside. You really think it's a good idea? For me to greet them when they arrive?"

"Well, considering now they are under your command. Or whatever you call it."

“We made a deal. If they decide to leave Zion—which I’m sure most of them will, considering they can’t handle my authority—they will be transported to the mainland.”

“Just like that?”

His fingers move fast around the cube but he doesn’t let his eyes off me. Or so it seems.

“Just like that, Kat. I’m done with them and all the bullshit. One less headache.”

“Droga and Callie won’t leave.”

“No.” He shakes his head, dropping his gaze down to his hands. “I talked to them. Neither will Ty and Dani. Ya-Ya won’t. Maddy and Bo won’t. The rest will have to figure out whether they want to tuck their pride into their undies and make a life here following my rules or... Yeah. Leave.”

“I suppose you are right.”

“You suppose?” He snorts and raises his eyes at me.

God, there is that Archer again.

“I suppose you own this island. So, yeah...”

“Yeah...” He studies me for a moment, then sets the Rubik’s cube on the table—solved.

God, I missed the bastard. “So when do we get together?”

His smirk turns into a smile that I love. “Missed me?”

“Maybe not you, but certain aspects of you.” I throw an intentional glance down his body.

“We can make up for it right now.” He tilts his head to one side.

Yeah, that’s our language—sex.

My phone beeps.

Marlow: They arrived. East docks.

“Shit,” I murmur. “They are here.”

Archer’s cheerfulness is wiped off his face.

I get it. He and the Outcasts are like a couple who is going through a nasty divorce. But the only thing that’s on the table here is pride.

And that’s the one thing no one is ever willing to give up.

KAT

SURRENDERING IS NEVER EASY. ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU HAVE TO BOW TO the person you loathe.

Most Outcasts hate Archer Crone. Who wouldn't have a grudge against the person who has power over the entire island and exiled you to live in the wild for two years?

But Archer is trying to make it as easy as possible. He is humbling himself, which is a big step.

I watch at a distance as the Outcasts, eighteen of them, plus Maddy and Bo, plus a kid—where the hell did the kid come from?—get off the boats and congregate by the docks, nervously clutching their backpacks and talking to Marlow.

The Outcasts have humbled themselves too, but theirs is the submission of the defeated.

I finally come over and hug Callie, then talk to Maddy.

"So it's happened," I say as I walk behind the group led by Marlow to the East Cabanas where they all will be staying for a short while.

"This is a big step," Maddy says. "Thanks to Archer and, well, Kai."

"What's the story with the kid?"

"Kai and Callie picked him up from Port Mrei. He was homeless."

"So, he's living with them now?"

"I guess. They can tell you all about it. They have your backpack that you left on the Eastside."

I chat with Owen, Kristen, and Ya-Ya as they get situated at their bungalows. There's agitation among them because they were promised to

get access to the Center.

And that's where the whole gang heads in less than half an hour.

The Center is a stark contrast between the slick technology and the shabby getups of the Outcasts—tanned, beachwear, no makeup. They look like hippies at tech headquarters. The employees of the Center study them with curiosity. The Outcasts stare back with hostility. They've been told the world is in shambles. And here they are—in tropical Silicone Valley.

A big room is cleared for the Outcasts who wait their turn at the computers to connect to the mainland. In two years, they forgot the feel of a keyboard. They forgot the sound of the dial tone. And they forgot the faces of their loved ones—if any survived.

There's too much to do. Talk to their surviving relatives. Get legal stuff sorted on the mainland. Find out if there is anything left for them there.

I stay close to Kai and Callie, Maddy and Bo, Ty and Dani. None of them have anything left. But we are all here for support, watching through the office glass those who take their turn at the computer. Gauging their reactions. Watching the emotions collide—grief, despair, happiness. Mourning, two years too late.

Kristen breaks down in tears, and Maddy runs in to comfort her, saying something to a person on the screen.

Owen is the wealthy one with a hefty hedge fund he inherited from his family, but only his mother survived the bombings.

There are cries.

And laughter.

And clenched fists.

And wiping away happy tears.

"I'm going home."

One of them has a home.

Ty goes in with Dani, and in twenty minutes, we see him drop his face into his palms as he rocks for some time, Dani leaning over and comforting him.

When they walk out, Ty rakes his fingers through his long blond hair. Surf tank and board shorts, his tan even darker than I remember, his lean sculpted body slightly hunching—I don't think I've ever seen this golden boy without a smile. And here he is—red eyes, absent stare.

"What is it?" Marlow asks him.

"I have to go back," Ty says.

Even I halt in shock. I only spent several weeks on the Eastside, but I can't imagine Zion without Ty. I know Dani's family was killed after the Change. She doesn't want to return. Why would *he*?

"Go back why?" Marlow asks in shock.

"Raylin. There's no death certificate for her. She is still missing."

I lock eyes with Kai. He mouths, "His sister."

Marlow shakes his head. "There are thousands of missing, Ty. That doesn't mean—"

"I need to go back," Ty insists, pacing back and forth.

"Ty?" I get up and walk over. "My dad does missing person's investigations. Private. He has connections. He can do some research before you decide on anything."

This is the wrong place and time to make hasty decisions. For the next several days, for Outcasts, it will be just that—catching up, reliving the horror of the Change through the stories of the survivors, and seeing their faces for the first time in two years.

I walk outside with Maddy.

"I'm staying close to them for the next several days," she says. "They all need a medical checkup. They haven't had any in two years."

We stand in the sun and absently study the jungle and the manicured lawns around the Center.

I nod. "They'll be alright. We all had to go through this."

Maddy studies me in that intense way of hers. "You often come across as insensitive, you know."

"Pardon me?"

"You didn't lose family during the bombing, Kat, did you? You tend to act like the Change didn't happen."

Here it comes—the shaming for not being sympathetic.

"You know," I say with a smirk—that smirk I perfected thanks to Archer, "I was twelve when my mom died. I was heartbroken. One day our neighbor saw me crying and said, 'It's all right. Life goes on. Your mom is in a better place, sweetie.'" I snort. "Better place, Maddy? I was twelve and thought I wasn't good enough if my mom had to go to a better freaking place. So now millions got killed during the attacks. They expect those unaffected to mourn just the same. Guess what? Their loved ones are in a better place. I'm just repeating the words I heard too often in the past."

Maddy is quiet. No one likes unpopular opinions.

My experience of the bombings might have been different—sitting it out in a nuclear shelter my dad and uncle built in the mountains of Pennsylvania.

But it was still life after death—emerging days later to find the world as you knew it gone.

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ARCHER

I TURN OFF THE PHONE FOR THE ENTIRE DAY.

Marlow doesn't show his face in the evening. Nor does Maddy, nor Bo, nor Kat, or anyone else—I get it, they are bonding over this little transition.

So be it.

I wish Droga would come over to discuss it, but he won't. I'll give him time, too.

Instead, I turn on the music and relax the rest of the night, read on my phone, drink, and think about Kat. She's becoming an obsession, and the only way to control it is to limit our run-ins.

I orchestrated a little surprise for her. She never asks for anything. She only did shopping that once when she first got her Ayana account. It's surprising, considering she has an unlimited budget. I hope my surprise puts her in a playful mood.

The next day, I go to the office and shut the blinds. I know that the Outcasts are in the Data Center next door. For some of them, the previous night was long, spent on calls with the mainland. Maybe, one of them will have the guts to come talk to me.

The only one who does is Maddy.

She looks tired, in her scrubs, her hair done in a bun at the back of her head. She takes a seat in the armchair across my desk, hands clasped together on her knees, and gives me updates about the Outcasts.

"Ten of them want to go back to the mainland for sure," she says calmly, giving me an account as if she wasn't one of them just weeks ago.

That's absolutely fine with me.

“They spent the last twenty hours at the Center,” she says, “sorting out their financials, bank situation on the mainland, records of the deceased. Everyone who wants to stay needs to talk to you, Archer.”

“No. Spare me, Maddy. Pawn it off to Bo. He is officially taking over resort management as of next week.”

“Archer, those from the Eastside—”

“Maddy, it’s non-negotiable,” I cut her off abruptly. I meet her calm gaze and wonder if I should offer her the position of my assistant. We need people at the medical office, but she is so reserved and calm that it grounds me. I lack that in my life. “I’ll set Bo up with HR so he has a team who can handle this. It’s very simple. The Eastsiders want to leave—talk to Marlow and see when he can arrange for one of the cargo boats or my jet to transport them. They want to stay—Marlow can figure out what their accounts are. If they have family funds, they can pay for accommodation and talk to HR to see where they can work. If they need a job that is. If they don’t have funds or family—well, figure it out with them. There are plenty of things to do on Zion, and I have too many things to handle besides them.”

I am yet to figure out what to offer Droga and Callie to keep them close to me. Slowly, things are coming along and the wounds are healing, or so I’d like to think.

Maddy gets up and tilts her head to the side as she studies me.

She is one of the very few who doesn’t falter under my gaze or react dramatically to my anger or strict orders.

“You are in charge, Archer. And you need to sit down with them and do the peace treaty. Or whatever you want to call it. You might not want it, but *they* need it.”

God, she is like a mother. I don’t answer, and she smiles softly as she leaves like she got a yes from me.

This Outcast business is ruining my mood and making me antsy, despite trying to convince myself that I don’t give a shit.

My blinds are shut, so I can’t see the wild thing, don’t know if she’s at work or not. I have an urge to watch her constantly. It’s not suspicion anymore but curiosity. Awe, maybe. Her persistence in anything she does is astounding.

But what do you know—it rarely happens, and when it does, it’s like Christmas in July—Kat comes knocking on my door.

No matter how much I try to think of something else during the day—anything but her—she tiptoes back into my mind. Naked. Or in a bikini. Or standing on a cliff on the Eastside. Or colored in blue light in my pool. I catch myself wondering what she is doing and have to restrain myself from checking where she is on the tracker.

She makes control hard.

Makes *me* hard.

Right now, she is wearing a short dress that I like much better than cargo pants, and her hair is tied in a bowtie at the back of her head. I want to mess it up with my teeth, like a dog.

“Ty is all upset about his sister,” she says, walking slowly to the desk.

“Raylin?” I’ve never met her, though I heard plenty from Marlow back at Deene. She was several years our junior and had a crush on Marlow.

Kat nods. “His family’s lawyer doesn’t have her death certificate. Apparently, she went missing, and they didn’t issue the legal paperwork. Naturally, he wants to leave Zion and search for her.”

“Thousands went missing and are presumed dead.”

“Right. I sent Dad her info. Maybe he’ll find out what happened to her. How would Ty find out otherwise?”

“Are you playing the Good Samaritan, Kat?” I attempt a smile.

She shrugs. “Marlow wants him to stay. Ty would stay if he wasn’t obsessed now about the possibility of his sister being alive.”

“Right.”

Others’ problems are not mine. I give them access and means—they can figure out their lives.

And *I* need to figure out what to do with my obsession with this girl. Because when she is this close to me, all I want is to steal her away somewhere secluded and have her to myself. And that doesn’t necessarily mean sex.

Well, as long as I get it out of the way.

“You seem tense,” I say, getting up.

“I haven’t relaxed much lately.” She flickers her gaze at me as I approach.

“Yeah? Why not?”

“I thought we had a certain arrangement.”

I want to laugh. She is so casual about sex.

“We do.” I walk behind her and put my hands on her waist, pulling her closer to me.

Her closeness instantly makes lust move like a slick coil through me before settling heavily in my cock. Seconds—that’s a record.

“I was busy,” I murmur into her ear, her scent filling my nostrils and putting me on edge. “You were busy when I wasn’t. It’s the usual story with us.”

I say *us* like there is an *us* in any type of context besides the bedroom. Though I missed her. I miss her laughter that is around me and not directed at the guys in the Center who all invite her to Port Mrei or restaurants or house parties. Most girls don’t like her, but those who do cling to her like she is the ring leader.

She is incredible at making friends. And it’s incredible how jealous it makes me because most of them are guys. The less I see her, the less I’m tempted by her. Or bothered by unnecessary emotions.

“All you need to do to relax is pick up the phone and dial my number.” I nuzzle her cheek, tightening my arms around her waist.

“Awe, you are willing to be my bootie call?”

“Your boss, your bootie call,” I say as I drag my nose along her neck. “Your right hand when yours is tired, especially when it’s between your legs.”

“Just to remind you. We are at work,” she says, her butt pushing back against the erection that tents my jeans.

“Which lately seems like always. Corlo, lock the door,” I say, then slide my hand up to take her chin between my fingers and turn her face up to mine.

Before she objects, I take her mouth in a kiss, deep and thorough, and suddenly, the week that I tried to stay away from her seems like the stupidest idea.

The taste of her jerks me back to the night we spent together. Naked. Skin to skin. When we *had* all night to do what we wanted. When we actually took our time getting to know each other. In more ways than one.

Why the fuck haven’t we repeated that yet?

“Did you miss me?” I whisper between the kisses.

Her hand slides between us and rubs my cock through my jeans.

And why do I always hold back with her?

I unzip my jeans and push them down, then lift Kat's skirt, tug down her panties, and thrust into her.

Good hell... I almost want to laugh in relief—that's all I needed for days. Her. This. I need to get this out of the way so I can think about anything else. Sex binds us. It's just sex.

She bends to put her hands on the desk, and I hold her tightly as I thrust into her from behind.

We don't say anything, just fuck slowly—like having a cocktail at the end of a stressful workday.

There are no tricks, no teasing. Just the pleasure of my cock sheathing into her soft warm core, her butt rolling against me, the sight of her skirt hitched up to her waist as she gives me what I need and takes what she wants.

I stroke her hips and thighs, waiting for her to reach her climax, which is quieter this time as she holds back her moans. Another revelation—I don't think I've met a girl who can come so fast.

I pick up the speed and release into her within seconds. It's easy with Kat—the sex part. Everything else is a riddle.

Just sex... That's all this is. But the more I repeat it in my head, the angrier it makes me. There's this strange emptiness that washes over me as soon as I let go of her.

I force a smile as I zip my jeans and study Kat, who is beautiful and flushed as she fixes her skirt. This simple act breaks the intensity of wanting her on an hourly basis.

"So the office..." she drawls, scratching her brow awkwardly as she looks away.

"Yeah," I echo. Rules keep being broken, and I like it. "I need to get out of here. Wanna take a ride?" *Wanna spend more time together?*

She narrows her eyes, trying to suppress that playful smile. "You like bike rides, huh?" She smiles, crossing her arms at her chest. "Sure. As long as there are no snakes."

I chuckle, dropping my eyes to her lips. I need to kiss them way longer than five minutes. I brush my thumb against her cheek—I noticed this little gesture takes her aback. "How are you with heights?"

Her eyes widen. "Are we talking about sex again?"

"Oh, I know how you are with that." I tongue my cheek, considering fucking her one more time. "I am talking about flying."

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KAT

I HALT IN SHOCK. “W-WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?”

Archer pulls his phone out of his pocket and dials. “Hey, Stewart, can we get clearance for the helicopter?... No, just out and about... Yeah... I’ll pilot myself, no worries... Yes. Twenty minutes. Get it ready.”

He hangs up, and my jaw drops open, my heart fluttering like a butterfly.

Archer smiles mysteriously. “You look good with your mouth open, kitten.”

When do I ever blush?

Right about now.

Archer chuckles, giving my cheek a stroke with his thumb again, which makes my heart flutter.

It’s always like this with him. Raw sex—no strings attached. And then those little gestures that pull the strings of my heart. Because guess what—there *are* strings. The strings that make my throat all scratchy from the intense feeling of wanting to spend one more minute close to him.

“Come on.” Archer motions toward the door.

Wind blows in my face as we ride through Ayana, my arms wrapped tightly around Archer’s waist. I am so pumped about the idea of a helicopter ride that I grin like a maniac, then press my cheek against Archer’s shoulder and sink into the feeling of being so close to him.

He emanates power without visibly doing so. His presence fills the room when he walks in. When we are outside like this—the warmth in my

heart at being next to him fills my entire world. Maybe it's for the better we only meet so often.

The airport, nestled in the jungle, is a small airstrip with three large hangars.

"Mr. Crone." One of the airport security guards nods with a smile, slightly bowing, and leads us toward the helicopter.

"Why am I not surprised that you know how to fly a helicopter?" I say as Archer helps me inside, then goes around, and climbs in.

"Did I cease to surprise you, kitten? Shame." He clicks his tongue, but he knows I'm just teasing him—my smile is a dead giveaway.

My heart pumps with excitement when Archer presses the button to turn on the engine, another to pump the fuel, and the deafening noise of the rotor blades spinning fills the cabin. He motions to fasten the seat belt and put on the intercom headset, then stretches his hand to flip the sound switch on my headset.

"Can you hear me, kitten?" He smiles and I grin back.

"Yeah." I laugh. I think he likes when I laugh. His smile grows bigger when he pulls the controller and the heli lifts softly from the ground.

"Let's fly, then."

We've done many things together.

Now we are flying.

This man is a dream.

Zion from above is beautiful, like a Hawaiian island surrounded by endless azure water. It's an emerald-green mountainous mass with featherlike clouds above it—under and around us.

There is the Ayana resort, with its blue dots of pools and white decks and roofs, the beach next to it sprinkled with specks of boats and yachts.

The heli goes higher and east, and soon, I see the Eastside beach, nestled among the rocks and cliffs.

"Eastside!" I shout and wave as if someone can see me, though you can barely see any huts or cabanas, too small and hidden by the jungle. As of the day before, it's officially deserted.

South Zion is a long beach strip and a windy dirt road that we took weeks ago, but Archer guides the helicopter higher yet and north, and soon I see Port Mrei.

It's bigger than I thought, dozens of streets, a port with a cluster of boats and watchtowers here and there. East of the town is a vast area that looks

almost like a desert, sprinkled with colors.

“Is that the Ashlands?” I ask, pointing a finger down at Archer’s feet. The floor of the helicopter is see-through, and that makes the ride even wilder.

Archer doesn’t answer.

The Ashlands is a tent camp, or whatever material the Savages use to build shelters. LA’s homeless scene is nothing compared to this. Who knew that paradise can have slums?

I wish I could see the Ashlands closer. It’s sad, really. With all the money poured into this island, some people barely survive.

“Have you ever been to the Ashlands?” I ask.

“I had no reason to.” Archer doesn’t turn to me when he speaks.

“It’s your island. Shouldn’t you know how people live?”

“I have no interest in other people. We give them jobs. They can either work or live like rodents.”

Harsh.

“What about Port Mrei? When was the last time you were there?”

I hear a chuckle. Oh, that’s right. “Before you went to hunt down Kai Droga, that is,” I add.

“I haven’t in more than a year.”

“Why?”

“I have everything I need at Ayana. These days, it’s mostly my villa or the Center.” His lips are pressed tightly together.

I shouldn’t feel bad for a billionaire who has everything he wishes for. Does he? Now that I got to know him a little bit better, he is nothing like the happy-and-rich-so-you-can-suck-it Archer I saw in Deene pictures before the Change.

I want to dig deeper inside him and find the cause of that grimness that’s all over him, the coldness that’s like a wall he hides behind. Droga is probably the only person who knows real Archer. *I* want to be that person, too.

I can’t take my eyes off him.

How many talents can a human have? This man is the most amazing person I’ve ever met. That’s it. I admit it. But besides all the achievements, it’s him—his body, his voice, his gestures that seduce me.

“We are shooting off to the next island,” he says.

“Next island?” I can’t stop looking at him.

“You’ll see.”

But all I see now is the man who makes my heart beat wildly in my chest. I study his concentrated face, his muscled hard body under the black shirt, his strong hands that do amazing things to me in bed.

“Don’t get any ideas,” I hear his voice in the headset and raise my eyes to see him looking at me.

I wasn’t looking at his dick, I swear. “I don’t have any ideas. Not until later.”

His soft chuckle makes me tingle with warmth. This is more powerful than sex—making a man like him laugh.

I know the safety of the helicopter. Know I should stay in my seat. But I can’t help it. I unbuckle my belt, lean toward Archer, and kiss him, soft and deep—only several seconds, feeling my stomach drop as the helicopter dips.

Fumbling, I pull away and scramble to my seat, buckling up.

“You can get us killed, kitten.” Archer chuckles, though I know he did that on purpose. And I know he purses his lips to hold back a smile.

I smile and look out the window. “How would it feel dying with a hard-on?”

“As long as it’s inside you.”

I grin and shake my head.

“Hold on,” Archer says with a warning in his voice, and suddenly, the copter cranes to one side and drops abruptly, making my stomach flip again as I squeal in surprise.

Archer straightens the copter, and I turn to see him grin. “Did I make my adrenalin junkie happy just now?”

I laugh, my heart fluttering.

Only weeks ago, I choked him out for that very word. Beautiful prick didn’t know that adrenalin junkie was exactly what he needed on this boring-ass island. *My* was a slip-up, I’m sure. But my heart is about to burst in my chest. My grin is so big my face is about to crack in two.

Twenty minutes later, there is an island on the horizon.

“I’ve seen it on the map before,” I say. “Is it populated?”

“It has a camp with scientists who used to come to do research on marine life. Only several dozen people.”

“Still there?”

“No idea.”

“You didn’t bother to find out?”

“I’m sure someone does. There is another island farther off, about forty miles. Several luxury villas and a very small local population.”

“You keep in touch with it?”

“No. But they have a helipad, which means someone can fly there from the big island two hundred miles west.”

“Wanna take a boat to that island sometime?”

I smile at him and wiggle my eyebrows.

Archer’s smile is not so cheerful. “That would have to be with an army of guards. Kat, you know how it is on the mainland. Think of Port Mrei and the Ashlands. What do you think these small islands turned into?”

I didn’t think about it, true.

We circle the island for another minute, not getting too low—“We don’t want to get shot at, do we?” Archer says—and turn back toward Zion.

I don’t want to let him go, which is a slippery slope, considering I am here to do a job, and he considers me entertainment. Every fuck we share is closer to the end. And that slippery slope—I’m diving head in.

But it’s even more disappointing when we land and, as we walk toward his bike, his phone rings.

“Another meeting,” he says when he cuts the call. “Want me to take you to your place?”

“I’ll go to the Center and work for a bit.”

I still have a lot of paperwork to sift through, and later, I might go and crash some party. Archer doesn’t trust me with the residents’ files, so I have to make friends.

“How about dinner?” he asks as he helps me onto his bike, his words so seemingly laid back that for a moment, I am taken aback. He wants to have dinner? With me? “At my place. Eight o’clock.” He lets a smile out to play.

His voice is warm and husky. I like when he loses that edge he has around other people.

“Sounds nice,” I murmur, dizzy from the thought.

First, we do breakfast. Now we top it off with dinner. This is getting a bit complicated, and this complication makes the butterflies in my stomach go wild.

My hands are on his waist, feeling his every little move, his breathing as we ride through Ayana, and I squeeze him tighter so that he knows I am in. Wherever this is going.

We walk into the Center together, drawing glances from the employees. They all run their mouths, but I don't care. When I'm gone, I'll be history.

"Eight o'clock," Archer reminds me as we part. "Later."

My heart sinks.

I want to hear, "Later, kitten." This sudden change in his attitude is annoying. He smiles at others in the office. Me, I'm like a dirty little secret.

And, of course, the Pink Medusa is leaning on the doorway to her office, her hand curling a pink strand, her eyes shooting arrows in my direction.

I smile widely at her and stroke the Cuban links around my neck just to fuck up her mood.

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KAT

I'VE SPENT AN HOUR FINE-COMBING O'SHEA AND CUNNINGHAM'S FILES when a message comes from Dad.

O'Shea's house fire in Birmingham was arson, though they never found the culprit. That time, O'Shea was in Russia(red flag), then went to the Emirates without ever going to Birmingham(red flag). Stayed there for two years. Something is not right. I'm still waiting for my Russian connection to give me info about his son.

I want to tell Archer. He needs to know. His office is open, Pink Medusa standing at the doorway, though the blinds are closed.

I walk up.

"He's busy," she blurts, swinging her hair over one shoulder so intensely it almost sweeps across my face.

"I'll find out for myself. Thanks."

But when I take a step forward, she blocks it.

Bitch.

I crane my neck and see Archer with two other guys. They laugh—apparently not *that* busy.

"I need to talk to him," I say more out of stubbornness than anything else.

"I'll let him know," Margot says and closes the door, walking inside.

It doesn't close all the way, so I can see her lean over to Archer, and without turning to look at me, he shakes his head.

Seriously?

She comes back, pushing me out as she steps out of his office, closes the door, and crosses her arms over her chest.

“As I said, he’s busy.” She arches her painted eyebrow that I want to pluck with pliers.

I turn around, pick up my phone from the desks, and leave the Center, texting Archer.

Me: Call me when you get a chance.

I know we’ll see each other at dinner, but I want to hear his voice and share the info.

I get to my bungalow and take a shower. But an hour later, there’s still no answer.

Me: Or you can ignore me.

No answer.

Fuck you, Archer, and your dinner.

How can a guy be such a gentleman and a dick at the same time?

Fury burns my blood as I text Marlow. He is in Tapas, so I change into a knee-length green dress and an hour later head there.

Tapas is filled with people. Some faces I recognize, others new.

“Cece’s birthday is tomorrow,” Marlow says as I join him and Axavier at an outside table.

Axavier who is wearing a leather jacket despite the heat finishes his drink and orders another one. “Some are pre-gaming.”

Marlow’s smile drowns my anger. Thank God there’s someone level-headed in my life.

“Cece’s birthday is a huge party. Dj, booze, food, fireworks. It’s at Bacaro restaurant,” he explains.

“I wasn’t invited,” I say.

“Well, I was. And you can go as my plus one. Unless you have plans with Mr. Chancellor.”

“I don’t have plans,” I blurt.

“Alright, then.” He picks up a guitar that stands propped against his chair and with a graceful swing sets it on his lap. “Any requests?” He plucks the strings.

I knew he plays guitar but never heard it.

Marlow doesn’t play anything specific, just plucks away for some time, chatting with Axavier and another guy who comes over to our table. Girls usually stay away.

“They are just wary, jealous, or curious but too proud to ask about you and Archer. There are rumors, you know,” Axavier explains when I voice my thoughts, biting away at the California burger that I ordered because I’m hungry. But mostly, out of spite of Archer’s dinner invitation.

The restaurant hums with chatter.

“Nick, play ‘We Will Rock You’!” a blonde girl from the other side of the cafe shouts.

Marlow grins and winks. And then starts singing.

Jesus Christ. His voice could seduce the devil even if the devil was a he and straight.

I order yet another cocktail and rest my chin on my palm, watching him, then turn to Axavier and nod toward Marlow. “Seriously, dude, how is he single?”

Axavier takes a long drag of a cigarette. “Habitat isolation.” He exhales loudly, and both he and Marlow burst out laughing.

“You guys, seriously.”

My eyes have been constantly on my phone for the last hour. And when it finally beeps, I snatch it like it’s the most important message of my life.

Archer: You are late.

Finally.

“Something exciting?” Marlow leans back in his chair with a suspicious stare.

“Yeah. Someone who thinks he can whistle and everyone comes running.”

He exchanges looks with Axavier. “Well, to be fair, you look like you enjoy our Chancellor’s whistles.”

I give Marlow a stare so vicious that he starts laughing.

“Chill,” he says. “Nothing’s wrong with that.”

I feel myself blush as I type a message for Archer.

Me: Something came up. Next time.

He responds right away.

Archer: Ditching your date is not nice, kitten.

My heart slams in my chest—I wasn’t aware that was supposed to be a date.

We are using big words now, and they are making me uncomfortable. When Archer is around, I can’t keep a straight face. I soak in every stare, every word, every movement. He’s using me for his own pleasure. That’s a

no-brainer. That's fine. But I'm starting to get jealous. Restless when he is not around. Angry when he ignores me. Vulnerable when he uses words like *date*.

We made it clear we use sex as a release. Yet the way he wrapped me in his arms when I slept in his bed is not casual. Neither is the helicopter trip. Neither is this dinner invitation. It's messing with my mind.

Everywhere I look, I search for him. Just a glimpse that gives me a needed fix. Like I'm a junkie for him.

Archer didn't say a word when Margot shut the door in my face. But obviously, he thinks he can snap his fingers and my panties will fall down.

Instantly, I replay the scenario in my head.

His fingers. My panties.

I am such an idiot around this guy that it makes me angry.

Archer: I'm waiting.

Good.

I don't reply, put the phone away, and smile at Marlow. "Babe, play something..."

"Something?" He raises his brows in question.

"That will make my heart explode and sing at the top of my voice." I need a distraction.

"Oh, God." He wrinkles his nose. "Do I even want to hear that?"

I slap him on the arm and laugh.

"Play, Marlow, please," I beg. *So I don't have to think about Archer.*

The tug to check the phone is stronger than anything. And the lump in my throat for no reason whatsoever is annoying.

Damnit.

Marlow sits up straight, gives his guitar a caress, and slams the first cord.

"*Give me a second,*" he starts with a soft smile.

I know this song!

A softer accord follows, and I loudly join in for the next line.

And then several others around us join.

He did the trick, because in a moment, I am singing—we all are—at the top of our voices.

It's "We Are Young," a tribute to the times when the future looked bright and we thought that we would indeed set the world on fire. Instead, politicians did, killing our dreams.

Marlow is brilliant on the guitar, his voice the sexiest shade of husky when he sings.

A small group drags their chairs toward us. A couple of girls bat their eyelashes at him. He winks at one of them.

Everyone whistles and claps when the song is over.

“How was my singing?” I grin at him.

“Terrible,” he declares with a frown. I dip my fingers into my glass and flick liquid at him. “Let’s do it again. Maybe we’ll scare away all the mosquitos.”

We sing another song. Then Marlow does a slow romantic one.

“This one is mine,” he says.

“Jeez, you write songs too? Nicholas Perry Marlow, how are you so amazing?” I ask him, finishing my cocktail, thinking that I should go back to my place, all the while acutely aware of my cellphone, wanting to check for messages.

“Awe.” Marlow cutely pouts his lips. “Are you sure you are with the right guy?”

He grins right away, and I roll my eyes.

I leave the restaurant in a bit, and as soon as I step outside, I pull my phone out and check the messages.

Nothing

I walk to my bungalow, simmering in disappointment, and swipe my bracelet.

The button lights up red.

“What the hell?”

I do it again.

Nothing.

I dial Marlow. “What does it mean when the house lock blinks red?”

“Your bracelet went faulty. Which never happens, really, unless the Center is down. Which, again, never happens.”

Silence follows.

“Or?” I prompt him, tipsy and irritated.

“Or, it’s deactivated.”

I swallow, then close my eyes, feeling anger rise in me.

“You can call guest services but...”

“But?” I snap. “Come on, Marlow! Help me out!” I whine.

“You should probably take it up with Archer first.”

Fucking. Archer. Crone.

I want to murder him. I cancel our little meet-up because he is an asshole, so he is acting even more like one.

I won't call.

Screw that.

He wanted a date—I'll show up and break his freaking windows.

I storm toward Cliff Villa, and by the time I reach it, my anger has subsided. He is like a magnet. The fact that I'll see him in a minute mixes my anger with anticipation.

The door is locked. I use the pin code he gave me to enter the villa, then step into the empty living room and frown at the familiar scent that I fail to recognize right away.

I hear male laughter. Big Dick has a guest? So, he locked me out of my house and now is having a party? Great. If it's Margot, I'll choke her, drag her body to the ocean, and drown her.

The voices are coming from the kitchen. I stomp in and freeze in the doorway.

It's just Archer, sitting on a high stool at the kitchen island, and one other man.

In a white chef's jacket.

"*Sawasdee khap.*" The Asian man presses his palms together in a prayer-like fashion and bows to me with a wide smile.

Sawasdee khap...

My heart whimpers at the words—Thai.

Archer's eyes are burrowing into me.

"What is this?" I murmur and inhale deeply the smell that brings tears to my eyes. Because it's so dear to my heart. It's adolescence. The streets of Bangkok. Night markets. Pad Thai. Tom yum. The smell of scorching spices. Green tea. Exhaust-filled air. Cat-whistles. Street hawkers.

The smell saturates the air in the kitchen, and the chef smiles happily at Archer who *doesn't* smile, just sits silently as I take several slow steps toward them, my eyes darting back and forth between Archer and the chef.

I can smell green curry. And papaya. Ginger. Garlic. Chili. This is not amateur cooking. This is legit.

My eyes frantically dart around the counter, looking at the dishes arranged in fancy plates and bowls.

How? There is no Thai food on the island. Then how...

“Khop Khun,” Archer thanks the chef, gets up, and shakes his hand.

This is the date I missed?

My heart tightens at the thought as I watch the chef leave and stare at Archer in shock.

And there it is—something I haven’t seen in a while. A bitter smirk on his lips as he says, “You are a little too late.”

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ARCHER

“WHAT IS THIS?” KAT SAYS ALMOST IN A WHISPER.

“Thai food that you missed so much.”

I try to be calm, though I am pissed.

I brought this guy from the mainland. For her. Spent three hours with him, watching him cook and learning Thai while waiting for the fucking date who didn’t even bother responding to my last text.

“It’s cold though,” I try not to sound bitter. “Are you hungry? Or did you just come to get your door lock activated?”

I stick my hands in my jeans pockets because I want to strangle Kat. I feel like a clown in my black dress shirt.

I’ve never been ditched before. And not for a dinner that cost me twenty grand. This was supposed to be a surprise. An effort to turn our meetings into something more than just fucking. Because I want more. *Need* it before my mind goes crazy.

But obviously, Kat couldn’t give a shit.

Except she is speechless.

Good.

“He came from the mainland to cook you dinner,” I say. “But I guess you had better plans.”

“I-I just had dinner,” she murmurs, studying the food wide-eyed.

She looks amazing and more feminine in a green dress that’s longer than her other ones. Which makes me even angrier, because she dressed up for someone who is obviously not me.

“Great. Not hungry then,” I say, feeling my blood starting to boil.

I snatch one of the salad bowls, walk toward the trash drawer, and dump the contents into it.

Kat gasps. “Wha—”

But I don’t want to hear what she has to say. I grab another bowl, turn, and walk toward the trashcan.

“What are you doing?!” Kat darts toward me and grabs the bowl out of my hands. But I have a firm grip on it and pull it back, and the salad goes flying around like confetti.

“You wanted papaya salad, baby? There.”

I toss the entire bowl into the trashcan and turn toward the kitchen island again.

I’m pissed.

“Green curry?” I arch my brow as I grab a bowl of curry. “Delicious!”

I don’t have time to turn, because Kat lunges at me.

“Stop!” she shouts. “Stop that! What are you doing?!”

She grabs the bowl too forcefully, and I let it go and the green curry flies into the air, spraying both of us.

I look down at my shirt, then at her dress, the smell of curry thick between us, anger even thicker as I stare at her and she at me, both of us breathing heavily like bulls at a corrida.

Da fuck!

I am trying to control myself, but *her* eyes burn like furnaces. Like I am at fault here.

Is she about to cry? Good. *Thanks for the date, sweetheart!*

“I invited you for dinner,” I say as calmly as I possibly can though it comes out like a grunt. “You stood me up.” No, my blood is on fucking fire.

“But—”

“I was trying to be nice.” I take a step toward her. “You wanna act like a teenager—fine. No dinners. Got it.”

I’m boiling with spite.

“Teenager?” She gapes at me like I just gave her the biggest insult ever. “Oh, that’s rich. I am a teenager?” She stabs her green-curry chest with her forefinger. “How about acting like a prick?” Her eyes shoot murderous fire at me. “Again. And as always. Because you don’t know how to act any other way. Nice and charming when you want to get your dick wet. But in the office, your little pink slut shuts the door in my face, and you don’t say a word like I am a cleaning lady there. A secretary? Sure. That’s my job.

Then don't expect a *date*, because maybe I have other plans with people who don't think of me as their fuck-toy and have a little more respect."

"What?" I frown. I have no idea what she is talking about.

"You treat other employees with respect. I am the only one you look down on in the office, knowing that I spread my legs when needed and don't squeak when you are busy. Fine. Wanna fuck? Sure, I'll fuck one more time. After this, I'll find someone else to entertain myself with. Someone who is nicer and doesn't turn his back on me afterward."

I see red.

She wants to fuck others?

Not a chance.

I step into her slowly. "You won't fuck anyone but me, kitten." I take another step, and she doesn't move, her nostrils flaring with anger. "That's a rule while you are here, understood? You are mine. And no one else on this island touches you."

Her laughter is so evil that it makes my insides twist. "What is this? Fifty shades of possessiveness? Try me, Mr. Chancellor."

"Stop with this Mr. Chancellor shit."

"Did I miss the small print, Archer? Where it said we are exclusive?"

"Don't play with me."

"Oh, no playing? No fucking then. Got it. So there won't be any competition for others."

I step into her so fast that she doesn't have a moment to blink when I smash my mouth into hers.

I kiss her like I want to eat her from the inside out. So she knows that she is not fucking anyone but me. Not until I am done with her.

This was uncalled for. Whatever drama she conjured is made out of thin air. I should be done with this shit show that makes us both crazy and irrational.

Except I can't stay away.

"No one but me, got it?" I hiss and smash my mouth to hers again to prove my point.

Our kiss is a battle. Her hands fist my shirt and pull me closer. She grazes me with her teeth, and I go feral, pushing her back and slamming her against the wall.

"Fuck you, Archer," she hisses, losing her breath, but in a moment, kisses me again.

And here we are. From zero to insane in less than a minute.

My hands yank the hem of her dress up.

My dick is so hard it hurts.

And Kat goes for it, the greedy horny thing that she is, and starts unbuttoning my jeans.

I'm gonna fuck her like she deserves. The way she likes it. Come and go, like she always does.

I whip her around to face the wall, undo my zipper in a second, yank her panties to the side, and ram into her to the hilt.

She cries out, and I want to fucking howl like a wolf, because she is wet, and the mere contact of my dick with her hot pussy turns my entire body liquid.

"You get wet like this for someone else, too?"

I slam into her, her wet pussy taking my every inch.

She moans and bucks her ass at me every time I thrust my dick into her.

"You said next time, yeah?" I hiss as I fuck her hard, my thighs slapping against her ass. "Wanna repeat this fucked up date next time?"

I keep slamming into her, faster and faster.

"You are beautiful," I grunt as I thrust like a maniac. "Addictive. And you are fucking me up."

I want to fuck her raw.

But then I realize that it's all going the wrong way. She's getting what she wants, winding me up again while I try to stay off booze just to keep my head cool.

I want to scream in anger and come inside her.

I want to kiss her mouth until she bleeds.

I want her to tell me that she wants me too, and not just in her bed.

And that's the fucking problem.

She'll never be tamed. I have to stop before it's too late and I'm too deep in.

I pull out so suddenly that I almost come from the feeling of my cock being tugged by her pussy.

Kat stills, and I press my forehead to her head, panting, my hands on the wall on each side of her, trying to calm the storm in my head and heart.

This craving for her is way past healthy. This is a hatefuck.

I wish I never met her. She is poison, and every time I see her, smell her, touch her, I want a cupful, an ocean full.

This has no logic, no explanation, no reason. It hurts deep inside in a way I can't rationalize. She is a constant presence in my life. I am a scientist, and I can't figure out what's wrong with me. I'm losing it, and the only time I am sane is with her, when we are fucking or sleeping next to each other. But that's when she messes with me, and I start losing it again.

Go! Just fucking go!

Kat doesn't move, pressed against the wall by my weight, her smaller hands flat on the wall just beneath mine—a little darker, prettier, gentler. Even her hands are beautiful.

She doesn't say a word, her breathing as loud as mine.

This is madness. I can't think straight around her. She—*this*—is fucking with my mind, and I can't have it. I'm losing control. What's worse—I am being played.

I push off the wall and tug the hem of her dress down, covering her ass, then push my erection back into my jeans.

"Leave," I say quietly, and turn away so I don't have to see her face.

I rake my fingers through my hair as I walk toward the kitchen island, my dick hard, my mind a mess, and my heart hurting like someone just took it in her hand and squeezed hard.

I don't understand this—us.

Kat has two moods. "Wow, that's amazing," and "I'll cut you." The speed with which they change is frustrating.

Fuck this shit.

And her.

"Leave, Kat," I say on an exhale. "Your lock is reactivated. Go."

I still don't look at her, because seeing her eyes will change my mind, and then it will be the same vicious circle again.

Flirt. Fuck. Snap. Argue. Fuck.

On repeat.

Sometimes in reverse order.

I hear her soft footsteps as she leaves the kitchen without a word.

I want to smash every single plate in my house. I am not even drunk, but I want to break things. I need a bottle and a line of coke.

I hear the soft sound of the front door closing.

Gone.

Good.

But the smell of green curry that saturates the air reminds me of her.

Exhaling loudly, I look around and want to roar in frustration.
Because the vicious circle starts again.
I don't cook. I don't even know if I have plastic containers in this kitchen.
And what do I do?
Yeah...
God fucking help me! My IQ drops around this girl.
I hate myself for this, but I open one of the cupboards and start looking for empty containers.
Because there is all this food cooked by a Michelin Star chef from the mainland.
Because *she's* been talking about it for weeks.
And though I hate her more than anything this very moment, she might want to eat it after all...

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KAT

THE NEXT DAY, I DECIDE TO DITCH THE CENTER. I TAKE A LONG SWIM IN the ocean, an even longer shower, then spend the majority of the day reading the files.

O'Shea doesn't leave my mind. If we find out that he has a connection with Tsariuk—this is major. Maybe Dad and I can get those Australian visas after all and I can leave this island and never see Archer again.

It's an angry thought. I love being here, spending time with Marlow, and... Yeah, that dick, Archer.

But last night, I sat on the terrace for two hours. In the dark. Thinking. Rethinking. Rewinding the evening in my mind. The dinner. Archer's anger. *"Leave, Kat."*

And I cried.

The last time I cried was after the assault charge back home. I felt angry and helpless. I felt the same last night but for a different reason. Though the same cause—a man.

Fucking men...

My mood is even worse today. The fact that Archer went to all that trouble with the Thai chef makes me feel like an ass. For standing him up. For being too arrogant.

Was that a date? Does he like me more than he leads me to believe?

I have no one to ask. No sisters or mother. I don't have girlfriends.

Marlow won't take it seriously, and we are not close enough to discuss my feelings anyway.

Maddy would listen, but she'll judge me.

Callie hates Archer, so that's a no.

Dad will be disappointed if he finds out.

Whatever is happening right now needs to be over.

I spend hours absently trying to do things around my bungalow—cleaning, making a sandwich, then reading a magazine. Nothing helps to pull me out of depression.

Until a text.

Marlow: Pick you up at seven.

Cece's birthday party. Right.

Archer won't be there—he never goes out. But the Pink Medusa might, and the rest of her coven. This is not a competition, but if she wants a stand-off, she'll get it.

I'm angry at the world. At myself. At Archer. It's not a good mood. But that's when I'm the best at channeling my inner Amazon.

I pull out the red strapless minidress and black leather high heels and lay them out on my bed.

I get ready like I'm going on the most important date of my life.

Here's a thing I learned about makeup. Women pay way more attention to it than guys. If a guy likes you, he doesn't care if you have three layers of foundation and smokey eyes, or if you only threw on some mascara. Women, though, are envious of each other's looks.

So there. This evening I'm gonna make bitches simmer in envy.

For the first time since I arrived on this inland, I unbraid my hair and wash it under the tap, then blow dry it and curl it. I can't remember the last time I curled my hair, but there—it's parted sideways and falls beautifully onto my shoulders and back.

Then I go full-on with makeup.

Smokey eyes? Sure.

Mascara? Double layer.

Red lipstick? Check.

I learned girl tricks not from mom, who I didn't have growing up, but from a ladyboy in Bangkok. Jonshu taught me how to dress, wear heels, and put on makeup. Took me behind the stage to bars and strip clubs. The legal age for anything in Asia depends on connections. I might've been barely sixteen my last year there, but I've been to more shady places than an average adult sex tourist.

Many young guys in Thailand are pretty, with delicate figures, and when they don't make up and fine clothes, including stilettos, nothing will ever give away their gender except an Adam's apple. And a dick, if it comes to that.

"You know what the trick about looking good in high heels is?" Jonshu asks me as he strolls in front of the mirror in a mini dress, high heels, and the natural wig that comes down to his waist and that he spent a fortune on.

Right now, he is not Jonshu. He is Jaine. Even his Adam's apple won't give him away because he is gorgeous, feminine, and graceful in the way he moves.

"No matter how goooooorgeous high heels are, if they are not comfortable, you'll look like a duckling after an hour of wearing them. Find the shoes that you can run in. Nothing ruins a pretty girl like blisters on her feet that make her wobble."

"Thank you, Jonshu," I murmur as I put on a beautiful set of lacy underwear because it makes me feel good about myself, then slip on the red dress and put on high heels. They feel like they are molded with my feet and I can run a mile.

I stand in front of the mirror and smile, enjoying the view.

In your face, bitches!

ARCHER

EVEN THE FACT THAT DROGA AND TY ARE FINALLY SETTLING AT AYANA IS not cheering me up. My mood has been shit since yesterday. Since... Yeah, since I kicked Kat out.

Which, logically, should be the best course.

But my heart is heavy. No matter what I do, I think of her. *Crave* her.

And here we are. It's early evening, and I'm on my fourth drink. Thinking about Cece's birthday, because she throws the biggest parties and I know Marlow and Kat will be there. Thinking about Kat, because that's all I think about lately. Staying away from her only makes it worse.

I open the phone and pull up the picture of her on the Eastside. The sight of her makes me want to text her, call her, drag her here and have a serious conversation about us.

Us.

How did this come down to a possibility of *us*?

Though it does have a ring to it.

Maybe, we just need to establish certain rules. Make a schedule. Like, a *fucking* schedule, so we don't get all stirred up over nothing.

I swipe the screen to the cam shot of her in my pool.

My gorgeous kitten...

I keep saying this in my mind, though Kat is not mine.

My phone beeps with the entrance gate sensor.

A minute later, Margot strolls in. Black party dress, a diamond necklace that covers her entire chest, her pink hair arranged on top of her head into some intricate nest.

“You look gorgeous,” I say indifferently, and she widens her eyes in feigned surprise.

“Did you just compliment me, Archer?”

With a well-practiced smile, she takes a seat right next to me, gracefully swinging one leg over the other and leaning onto me.

I set my phone face down on the couch.

“Are you sulking again?” She nods toward my drink.

“Relaxing.” I’m in no mood for a chat. “What’s up, Margot? You stopped here for a reason?”

“Well, a compliment from your majesty is good enough. Make me a drink?” She smiles. “Martinez. The usual.”

I get up reluctantly and go to the bar.

She starts chirping away as I take my time making the drink, not looking at her.

She takes her sweet-ass time drinking it too, telling me something about Cece’s new project with a jewelry designer from South Africa.

I couldn’t care less.

“I have something to do. Let yourself out,” I finally say, losing patience.

Her stare is vicious. Too vicious. She’s never upset about my rudeness. This time, there’s triumph, as if she knows something I don’t.

I just feel... lost. Not knowing how to steer back on track emotionally and mentally. Life is a circus. And now Kat makes it complicated.

One thing I learned with Droga is that conversations solve a lot of problems. So this time, I decide to step it up.

Here I come, wild thing.

I haven’t been to Ayana parties in months. But this time, I’ll make an effort. An effort is what counts, right?

Margot leaves, and I jump in the shower, then choose clothes, which only takes me a minute considering it’s all dark gray or black with little variations.

I have another drink and think of Dad.

The last time we talked didn’t go well. So I dial his number.

“Archer! How are you, son?”

He sounds awfully cheerful, which is unlike him. There is a ton of noise in the background.

“Where are you, Dad?”

“Rio. The International Assembly.”

“Important?”

“Well, it’s a yearly thing with the representatives from forty-five countries. Excruciatingly boring and time-consuming. Did you need something?”

When do I ever need anything from him? He always talks like I’m taking his time.

“Why don’t you fly to the island, Dad?” I say, finally. It would be nice to spend time with him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just... Come here. Let’s chill for a day. Talk.”

“You are not telling me something, son. What is it?”

“Nothing, Dad. Jesus! I’m just wondering if you wanted to spend a day together.”

He exhales. “I’m too busy right now. We have so many issues. I’m glad Gen-Alpha is doing well. Exceptionally well.”

“It’s not about Gen-Alpha.” I close my eyes, exhaling in frustration. He’s been like this for years. Like I’m a sidekick.

“I gotta go,” he says, simultaneously talking to me and someone else next to him, like always. “The assembly is starting in an hour. I have to rub shoulders with some big shots from the East.”

I don’t reply.

“I’ll call you tomorrow when I have more info about the new deal with them. Talk to you later, son.”

He hangs up.

It’s always about work and never about us.

I smirk. Like father, like son.

They say I am just like him. If I carry on this way, in a matter of time, I will be much worse.

KAT

MARLOW KNOCKS ON THE DOOR AT SEVEN ON THE DOT.

“Come in!”

“Holy shit,” he whispers from behind.

I turn and meet his wide eyes roaming my figure.

He is dressed to impress—leather pants, dark-blue-and-gold silk dress shirt, unbuttoned down to his pectorals, pointy leather dress shoes.

We gape at each other for a moment.

“Jesus, Kat.” He whistles.

“Too much?”

“No...” He shakes his head, his eyes sliding up and down and up and down like he saw the second coming of Jesus. “No-no-no. You are freaking gorgeous!”

I grin. “Yeah? You think the bitches will be gawking?”

“As long as you don’t try so hard with that grin. It won’t blend in.”

“Fuck off,” I blurt, snatching my phone and shoving it into my black clutch.

“Damn, Kat,” he whispers, still staring as we walk out.

“Stop it.” I jokingly smack him with my clutch.

Bacaro restaurant is all decked out when we arrive. Lanterns are lit up on the giant patio overlooking the steep hill, dotted with villa roofs, and the ocean below. The sun is setting. The DJ is mixing lounge music. Champagne and cocktails are served by the waiters walking around with trays. Like the Change never happened.

There are groups of people here and there, mostly young, with some faces I recognize. They stare at us like we are a prom couple.

“You got what you wanted.” Marlow smiles. *Attention, right.*

Marlow takes my hand and wraps it around his arm. “Safer that way, stay close. I don’t want you to be dragged into the bushes and kicked by a dozen high heels.”

Cece, the birthday girl, is a pretty curvy thing in a pink dress and heels, her hair pulled into a high ponytail. She is the least overdressed person, with a beautiful burgundy choker around her neck.

“Wow,” she says, studying me when Marlow introduces us. “I’ve heard things about you. Just not that you are drop-dead gorgeous.”

I smile. “I have an idea who you heard it from.”

“Yeah. This place is like a crow’s nest sometimes,” she says, and Marlow laughs, producing a small box out of his back pocket and passing it to her.

“Happy Birthday, sweetie,” he says, kissing Cece on the cheek.

“She seems nice,” I say to Marlow when Cece turns away to greet other guests and we claim a small high bar table.

“You’ll be surprised. Some of us wealthy offspring have hearts, you know.”

The party carries on, getting busier.

More people arrive. All of Ayana seems to be here, besides the Outcasts, of course.

This is definitely the posh crowd. It’s in the way they sit, move, walk, and talk like there is not a worry in the world and the air is privileged to seep into their lungs.

Stilettos. Dresses with furs of all colors. Givenchy purses. Gucci belts. Those are the brands I recognize. The party is blinding from all the bling. Extravagant hairstyles. Hours of makeup. Smooth skin. Fake smiles. Chic. Pretentious voices. Obnoxious laughter.

I might be too judgmental, but only an extraordinary amount of money gives such confidence that is intimidating.

A guy with female mannerism, wearing red pants, a translucent black shirt, and blue curly hair walks by and stops to give Marlow a kiss on the cheek, then points at me. “Oh, honey, with your complexion and body you need a Versace. Minimum. Just above the knee skirt and more exposure to this bust.”

He walks away, swinging his hips.

“Who’s that?” I ask Marlow.

“Cece’s stylist.”

I choke on my cocktail with a tiny umbrella. “She brought her own stylist to Zion?”

“Yes. Also a cook and an assistant.”

“What does she do?”

“Designs jewelry.”

“I mean, after the Change.”

Marlow turns to me looking annoyed. “Sweetie, life didn’t stop after the Change. Definitely not for the privileged ten percent.”

“Right.”

“Have you been to the east entrance to Ayana? The road that goes along the shore?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you see a Lamborghini and a custom Mustang there? They were brought for racing. Considering the dirt road is too shitty for racing, that’s just entertainment.”

“No way.” I saw those when Archer took me for a ride.

“Yes, way. You know, Archer has three bikes. Plus a helicopter. And a jet. And his yacht, the *Empress*. And two speedboats. And his is not the largest fleet.”

“Huh.” I know Archer is a millionaire. Billionaire? I’m not even sure. But that type of luxury is overwhelming. “You just dirt-shamed me. Thanks, babe.”

Marlow only laughs, then lights a joint and passes it to me. “I didn’t mean to, sorry. It is what it is though. Look around.”

“Do you have a jet? Or a helicopter? Or a yacht?”

“Nah. Only a speedboat.” He smiles. “Well, and a sports bike. And one of those cars parked at the East entrance. A Lamborghini.” He grins.

“Sssstop,” I hiss, but I’m unable to hold back a smile.

“And you haven’t been to my crib yet. That’s odd, now that I think about it.”

“Let me guess, you have a pool and a waterfall.”

“Plus, a steam room, a video game room, a recording studio—”

“Oh, god.” I slap his forearm.

That's the thing that shocks me the most about Marlow—he never boasts about himself or his money.

I, on the other hand, feel like a kid from the slums.

I turn to look at him, passing him the joint, and he grins that Hollywood smile that makes him irresistible.

A loud clapping of the hands turns my head in the direction of a heavy-built guy in a blue summer suit, boat shoes, a pachuco on his head, and a cigar in his mouth.

“Oh! Let me see!” he booms.

He is walking up to us slowly. In his twenties, he looks worn out and slightly drunk. Besides the prospect of future alcohol abuse and a heart attack, he is loaded with money, I'm sure, and—I have a feeling—sarcasm.

“Archer Crone's new secretary, isn't it?”

I smile coldly.

“Or is there something else to those duties?”

Another privileged dick.

I smirk. “How about his bodyguard? Should I choke you out? Punch you? Break your clavicle? Would you like a little demonstration?”

“Kat!” Marlow chuckles.

The guy's eyes widen.

I grin. “Joking.”

An amused look is frozen on his face as he studies me up and down—just like about everyone around for the last hour—and stretches his hand for a shake. “I'm Dean.” His smile is a hundred percent friendlier now. “I've heard you are peculiar. And... Gorgeous, yes.” He turns to Marlow. “I like her,” he says with a silly drunk giggle.

In the next hour, I'm introduced to over two dozen people at the party.

Axavier comes over for a talk. He is one of the few who is friendly, chatting me up about anything but work or Archer.

And I'm trying to work, scouting the girls. Though the cocktails are too strong and I'm already dizzy.

Milena Tsariuk might be one of those babes in the crowd. I've seen pictures of her—ironed blond hair, bangs, excessive mascara. She looked like a doll. It's easy to change the looks. And that's the thing about pictures—they can be deceiving without hearing a voice or seeing the person move and talk.

“Oh, look, your favorite person is here,” Marlow murmurs.

Margot.

Her pink hair is done up in some intricate design. A couture strapless dress hugs her body perfectly. A diamond necklace covers half of her chest, including the non-existent décolletage. She looks stunning, which makes me angry.

She stares at my dress across the vast terrace floor that is getting crowded with people and slowly turning into a dance floor. House music pumps the blood in my veins.

She says something to the girl next to her, and the entire group turns their heads at me.

I know why. Because I work close to Archer. If Margot is jealous, the rest of them must be furious that some nobody came to the island and snatched the richest guy.

I lean over to Marlow. “*S kem iz nih spal Archer?*” I nod toward the crowd, asking in Russian which ones Archer slept with so that Axavier doesn’t understand.

Marlow laughs loudly and shakes his head. “I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“C’mon, *solnyshka*, spill.”

“Many of them are from Deene, sooo...”

“Sooo?”

“Yeah. Archer used to get around.”

“Tell me! *Ya nikamu ne skazhy.*” I say I won’t tell anyone.

“Stop it, Kat.”

I’m jealous now. I just want to know so I can figure out Archer’s taste in women.

My clutch on the table vibrates, and I snatch it irritated. There is a speck of hope in my chest that it’s Archer as I swipe the screen and read the message.

Dad: O’Shea’s son lives in the Emirates with his mother. And his mother is Tsariuk’s sister. Call me when you get this.

I stare at it, then reread it several times.

“Holy shit, Marlow.”

I elbow him and pass him the phone.

His eyes widen as he reads the message and looks up at me.

“Holy shit...”

He glides his hand over his hair, absently looking around, then freezes.
“Guess who never comes out for parties. But here we are.”

I follow the direction of his gaze, and my knees go weak.

I forget all about the message. Because there’s only one man who looks that gorgeous. One man whose gaze locked on me across the restaurant can make my pulse spike.

Archer Crone.

I want to do something stupid right now, reckless, get drunk and flirt with all the guys around to make him jealous.

But I can’t escape his eyes or look away from him, dressed in all black, the sleeves of his black buttoned-down shirt rolled up as he cheers to me with a glass from across the room, and my knees go weak.

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ARCHER

I FELT LIKE AN OUTSIDER, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY DAYS ACTUALLY walking through Ayana instead of taking my bike.

And sure felt like an Outcast when the several faces I recognized by the restaurant entrance to Bacaro called my name and nodded, shock on their faces.

When I walk out onto the crowded terrace of Bacaro, all eyes turn to me. I used to bask in this feeling. I loathe it now.

Cece sashays over, looking beautiful. “Well, well, Buddha finally came down to the people.” She flashes her signature Hollywood smile.

I smile back, kissing her cheek. “Happy birthday, sweetie.” I give her a present.

“Oh, how thoughtful!” She opens the small thin box I gave her with curiosity, then squeals. “No way, a Domancier necklace? And you took the time to get it for me?” She looks around, her mouth O-shaped in surprise. “They said you weren’t well. I’m wondering if you lost your mind.”

There, the rumors.

I got the necklace for Anna Reich two years ago and never got a chance to give it to her. Cece will never know.

The waiter brings a drink. Cece says something, but I scan the crowd, looking for Kat. I know she is here with Marlow. Last night was a disaster. I just want to see if we can fix that. I *want* to fix that. She makes me angry but, fucking hell, I want this girl next to me.

And then I find her.

I do a double-take, and my head spins.

The Kat I see across the dance floor with Marlow and Axavier next to her is not the natural-look-tractor-boots-shorts-and-braided-hair Kat.

Fuck...

I can't take my eyes off her.

She is young Sophia Loren, Audrey Hepburn, Cleopatra, Aphrodite—I can't even find the words. I've never seen her with makeup on, let alone red lipstick, or in a party dress, red, hugging her beautiful body, and high heels.

Or...

With her hair unbraided, falling beautifully over one side of her face.

I'm usually cool as ice. Around her, I'm flammable.

I swallow hard, taken aback by the girl I thought I knew so well. Drowning in this moment when I finally realize I've gotten too fucking deep.

Kat notices me, her eyes pausing with that intensity that brings the last evening, the last dinner, the last fuck all at once to mind.

I cheer to her.

She cheers back, sets the glass down, and says something to Axavier next to her.

The DJ changes the tune to a slower Hispanic song remix. Kat takes Axavier by the hand and drags him onto the dance floor where a crowd is dancing already.

Someone bumps into me then recognizes me and starts a conversation. Another person comes over to say hello. I see heads turn in my direction.

I couldn't care less.

Everyone is faceless.

My eyes are on Kat—red dress, high heels, those beautiful legs that wrap around me when she fucks me, her long hair, wavy, and luscious against my skin when I run my hands through it.

But her smile right now is for Axavier, who slides behind her, her back to his chest as they rock their hips in sync to a *bachata* tune.

Anger rises in me. Jealousy shoots through the roof. Kat is never this open with me in public. We are *never* in public.

She is doing this on purpose. But I didn't come here for a game.

I lose my drink and slowly walk onto the dance floor, glances following me, the crowd parting as I walk through.

I reach Axavier, who already has his hands on Kat's waist—if we weren't in public, I would've punched the motherfucker—and grab his

shoulder, pulling him away.

He is about to object when he recognizes me. I nod for him to get lost and take a step toward Kat.

I set my hands on her waist and start doing slow steps in sync with hers.

One-two-three-tap.

One-two-three-tap.

There's a perfume I never smelled before on her. She doesn't notice it's me until I press closer to her, my hips against hers. She grabs my hands and tries to pull away, but I hold her tight as I lower my lips to her ear.

"Enjoying yourself, kitten?" I murmur.

She relaxes. And that's a sign. We might have had a little row last night, but she wants me and doesn't mind this public display.

Everyone is watching. Even those dancing. Those standing by the railing and at the tables are already gossiping. They've heard plenty, I'm sure, but they haven't seen me in a while, and definitely not with my girl.

My girl.

I'm way over my head. We've never cleared the boundaries. And they are blurring. I want them to blur like the cognac blurs my brain, in public or not.

Kat turns in her spot without breaking the rhythm or steps and checks me out, now facing me.

"Where did you learn *bachata* moves?" Her smile is more friendly and surprised than she wants it to seem.

It's okay.

I spin her in her spot.

She is smooth. Sexy. Perfect.

"Mexico. Tulum. I like learning new things," I say, my eyes locked with hers, the room suddenly non-existent, as if it's just me and her.

My hands take hers. I want to pull her close. I want a kiss, even though I hate lipstick.

She spins in her spot again, continuing the steps. She is good. Leading. *Fuck, Archer, your girl is taking charge.*

But that's Kat. She is beauty incarnate. Lust. She is so many things. And when we sway our hips in that intimate *bachata* move, her lips start spreading in a smile. "You are a good dancer."

"Why haven't we danced before?" I ask.

“Because all we do when we are together is fuck, right? That’s the deal?”

Her smile fades.

The words hurt both of us. I hate that she gave me something to lose. Her. One more thing on a long list. And hate when her mood switches.

“We can do many things together,” I try.

“My dad found out some important info. We found the mole.”

Really? Now?

We are dancing. All eyes are on us. I try to find a connection, start a conversation that might be more important than any other we’ve had before.

But hey, fucking work.

“Wanna talk about it some other time?” I lose the smile. “You don’t enjoy my company? There’s always something else, Kat.”

“You just said we can do other things together.”

“I didn’t mean work, Kat.”

She sounds like my dad.

“It’s important,” she says, blinking, that fire in her eyes changing into the dull glow of work mode.

The song stops.

We stop, our hands falling away from each other.

Another song comes on, too loud and cheerful for my current state—connecting. “I’m not in the working mood.”

“What mood are you in?”

“Kat mood.”

“Oh, since when do you come to parties to chase pussy? I thought you call, and I come.”

This is not working out. “You are being mean.”

“Because when I talk about work, you dismiss it like I’m here for one reason only.”

“Which is?”

“To get your dick hard.”

“Someone is in bad mood.” I try to smile.

“You know what would put me in a better mood?” She is so beautiful and her gaze is so intensely vulnerable that I ache. “If you left me alone.” A pang of disappointment flashes through me. “You don’t want to talk work—fine. We’ll discuss it tomorrow. But if you want to be a gentleman, which is rare, you would stop this Archer’s show and let me enjoy the evening.”

Kat turns and walks away so fast that I feel like a schoolboy dumped in the middle of a dance floor on everyone's display.

Clenching my jaw, I turn and make my way through the crowd in the opposite direction.

Whatever. This was a waste of my time.

Kat is a lethal combination, moving too fast through life. I can catch and trap her, but it's her mind that I want to own. And that thing is a mystery.

She is upset about yesterday. Understandable. *I* should be the one pissed. Yet, I threw a white flag, and she stomped it with her high heels.

Fuck. Kat is wearing high heels...

My mind is a mess.

I am a mess.

I should've never come to this party.

"Archer! Man! Wait!" Axavier catches up with me. "Man, I didn't mean to, like, flirt with her or anything. We were just dancing, yeah?"

"Don't worry about it."

I know why he's apologizing. My appearance just made a buzz. And I might've made a fool out of myself.

A beep comes from my phone. Then Axavier's next to me. And another.

The coincidence of it doesn't register in my mind right away until a bunch of people pull out their phones, and I see their widening eyes.

This is just like then, two years ago, when we got the warning about nuclear attacks.

"Oh, shit." Axavier chuckles next to me. "Man, Archer, you not gonna like this."

His eyes slowly rise to meet mine, and mine drop to the phone that I pull out of my pocket and swipe the screen.

The familiar picture makes the corner of my lips tug in a smile just for a second.

Kat. Neon-blue. Surrounded by pool water. Her head tilted back, eyes closed. Her bare breasts just above the water.

The picture I jerked off to so many times.

Except it's in a group message shared by thirty-plus people. With a tagline below it that makes my insides turn cold.

It's Cece's birthday.

But guess who is wearing a birthday suit?

Mr. Chancellor's favorite toy!

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KAT

I STOMP TOWARD THE TABLE AND DOWN THE COCKTAIL, THEN CATCH THE waiter walking by, snatch a flute of champagne from his tray, and down it.

Marlow watches me. “Kat, calm down. What just happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar. It was obvious you had an intense conversation with Archer, and it didn’t end well. Especially after you just danced like two lovebirds. And everyone was staring.”

“Marlow, stop.”

His phone rings.

Mine does.

Everyone around starts pulling out their phones and covering their mouths in shock.

“What is it?” I ask, noticing fingers pointing at me, stares, chuckles, and whispers that sweep across the party.

“Kat... Shit...” Marlow’s eyes dart from his phone screen to me.

I snatch his phone and look at the screen.

The floor drops from under my feet.

I remember that night.

But the picture? How? When? Why?

“Listen, if it’s any consolation, you look great,” Marlow says.

No, it’s not a consolation. It’s about me being naked in front of the entire party.

I raise my eyes and look around.

Sneers. Cowardly glances. Open stares. Grins.

We don't talk about that night in Bangkok...

Except, that's exactly how I feel—exposed.

These might not be sex-trafficking thugs about to get their hands on me. But the stares and glances are penetrating. Bringing flickers of the memories from that night.

My heart pumps like mad, between my ears, everywhere, a wave of heat drowning me.

I close my eyes.

The dim light from a lone lightbulb hanging from the ceiling of a damp basement is too bright.

The three girls next to me are as scared as I am.

All of us are naked.

But I'm the first in line.

I try to keep my shoulders straight under the stares of four thugs, who praise our bodies like we are cows at a slaughterhouse.

The first one unbuckles his belt as he takes a slow step toward me with a sly smile on his scarred face. The other guys lean on the wall or sit on empty crates, smoking and watching with an indifference that says they do this regularly.

"If you can take four of us—you pass the test and can work the streets of Bangkok. You fail—you are off to Cambodia."

I'm sixteen. Helpless. In a shady basement. Stripped naked.

This was supposed to be an undercover operation.

They said we would be safe.

Where is everyone?

They said they'd come!

"This might be the most important night of your life," the guy says with a scowl and unzips his jeans.

I open my eyes and inhale deeply, trying to calm my nerves.

It's suddenly too bright.

Too hot.

Too loud.

I feel like throwing up because when I look around, the girls' grins are just like those men years ago—knowing they inflicted the damage and will gloat if they do even worse.

That's the lesson the Change taught us—you don't have to be a criminal with a bad moral compass to destroy a person. You can be a pretty

privileged girl dressed in Dior and smile watching the other person be humiliated.

Being a woman, you just never expect it from other women. A dozen of them.

I feel suddenly too vulnerable, for the first time in years.

Shame washes over me.

Everyone knows the picture was taken in Archer's pool. No one could've taken it but him.

I find him in the crowd. Meet his intense gaze on me.

This is betrayal.

Or revenge.

Or some kind of fucked up lesson.

Whatever it is, I didn't expect it from *him*.

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ARCHER

I KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN A MINUTE.

I watch Kat across the dance floor. Her face is expressionless—a bad sign.

The only person who is ever close to my phone is fucking Margot. And I'm sure it's her doing. She has pushed it too far this time.

Marlow leans over to Kat, saying something to her as she clenches her jaw and shakes her head, then looks at me again.

Fucking fuck!

I start walking toward her. I need to get her out of here.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I look down, trying to make my way through the crowd.

Amir.

He never comes to parties. He doesn't drink. Doesn't smoke. As straight as an arrow. That's why his phone call is even more unusual.

"Something must be important if you're calling at this time," I say, fighting my way through the busy dance floor, my eyes on Kat, who stares down at her feet, so vulnerable that I want to set this fucking place on fire.

How does everything get progressively worse?

"Archer, something happened," Amir says loudly on the phone, though it's hard to hear because of the music. "I need you in the Center."

"What happened?" I push someone out of the way a little too forcefully.

Fuck them. All of them. That's why I don't hang out with this crowd anymore—they are like vultures.

Everyone cranes their neck to find Kat in the crowd, then look at me.

“Archer, are you there?” Amir practically shouts. “Archer, I need you at the Center. Right now! There’s been a terrorist attack...”

I stop in my tracks.

“And?”

I don’t like the word. It might be another war. There is one brewing right here, on the dance floor. I need to take Kat away and talk about this before she breaks someone’s face or thinks I had something to do with it.

“And *what*, Amir?” I snap.

The music starts blasting with a heavy techno beat, deafening me. I close my ear with a forefinger, trying to hear him better.

“Archer, please!” Amir’s urgent voice shouts on the other line. “Right now! The Center! I texted others!”

Others?

Marlow almost slams into me, grabbing my shoulder. “Did you hear the news?”

I cut the call and look around, but Kat is suddenly nowhere to be seen. “The picture?”

Marlow’s eyes are wide with shock when I look at him. “No! We’ll deal with that later. The terrorist attack!”

“*What* terrorist attack, Marlow? Can someone fucking tell me?” I shout through the music, frantically turning around. “Where’s Kat? I need to find her asap.”

“Archer! Kat can wait! There’s something else!” Marlow practically screams, turning me around. “It’s bad. Let’s go. We need to get to the Center. Right now!”

I see Qi Shan and Axavier fight their way through the crowd toward us.

Music is blasting. It’s in these moments that shit hits the fan. And my heart starts pounding to the heavy drum of techno.

Axavier yanks me by my arm. “We need to go to the Center!” he shouts, dragging me away.

“What *is* it?” I snap but follow because my crew is suddenly on the go. I keep looking back, trying to find Kat in the crowd. “Marlow, I need to find her.”

“Later, Arch!” he shouts pushing me.

What the fuck?

I punch a message to Kat.

Me: Where are you? We need to talk.

We jump on the scooters parked outside—whoever they belong to, we'll return them—and race to the Center.

My heart is thumping. If it's another world conflict, we have to be ready. We might have to go into a full lockdown again.

Our scooters zoom out of the main Ayana area into a jungle, the patches of darkness and light like zebra stripes, flickering against the road that leads onto the brightly lit up courtyard of the Center.

Slate and a group of guards are at the entrance. They go quiet and stare at me like I have a third eye.

I storm inside, Marlow on my heels, as well as the rest of the guys, shoes stomping like that of an army of soldiers.

The twenty-by-twenty-foot TV screen that takes up one of the walls of the surveillance room is a live feed from some city, a building on fire, half-destroyed, part of it in rubble, smoke, people running around, fire trucks, police, and military.

"Where is this?" I blurt out, walking up to the several surveillance guys who stare up at the screen. "Why is there a military presence?"

The live feed is ash and fire in the background.

Rio, the location on the bottom says.

Shit. That's where Dad is.

"Archer." Amir is next to me, and there is something wrong with the way he looks at me.

Scared, I realize. And not of what happened.

Of me...

"Amir. What's up? Where is this?"

"Archer, it's the Alejo Convention Center in Rio."

The world goes dizzy for a second. Then too quiet.

"It's where the International Assembly was taking place," he says, his words too slow and calculated. "The detonation epicenter was under the main hall where the meeting was."

No-no-no-no-no.

Sound and color are slowly draining from the world, through me, all the way down, and sending chills back up throughout my body.

All I see are the images flickering on the screen.

Numbers in the report line.

643 estimated dead.

Amir pinches the bridge of his nose. “The Assembly councils—everyone in that assembly hall is presumed dead.”

“But—” The words get stuck in my throat. That’s where Dad is.

“Including the Secretary of Defense. They just announced that,” he adds almost in a whisper.

The world is suddenly muffled like when your ears get blocked at high altitude.

The TV screen volume is on low, but I can still hear the correspondent’s fast speech.

The sirens at the scene.

The red line, “**Breaking news,**” flashing on the bottom of it.

My guys murmuring, “Fuck,” again and again.

The door behind us opening and closing.

The clacking of the heels—Margot.

The urgent whispers behind me.

Amir’s phone ringing.

Mine too, but I don’t pick up.

The Center phones suddenly go off the hook at multiple desks.

Then another.

And another.

The tension in the room is almost palpable.

I rub the back of my neck with my palm, trying to collect myself and snap out of this stupor.

“But he... No one knows for sure, right?” I want to argue. I just talked to Dad half an hour ago. People die. Horrible things happen. Just not to the most powerful men in the world.

Everything around is the same, yet isn’t. My brain can’t process the numbers on the screen.

643 presumed dead, over a thousand injured.

They don’t make sense. This just can’t be.

“Archer,” Marlow almost whispers my name.

“I’m sorry, Archer. It’s—” Even Amir, who is always on top of everything, is lost for words.

And I lose my sense of time and space. No words can describe what I feel. The Change finally caught up with me, with Dad—the man who was in charge of the country’s security and escaped the war.

Terrorist attack.

“It’s not confirmed though, is it, the identities of the victims?” I ask, hating how pathetic I sound, not able to tear my eyes off the screen, not even sure who I’m asking.

The words *victim* and *my dad* don’t sound right in the same sentence.

Amir casts his eyes down, hands in his pockets. “There can’t be survivors on the Assembly floor, they said.”

I take a deep breath.

Usually, my mind is dizzy with thoughts. Now it’s quiet. Like there’s a vacuum.

“I need a drink,” I say.

“I’ll get it,” Marlow snaps. “What do you want?”

“No, let’s go to my villa. I need a moment.”

“Sure,” several of the guys say at the same time.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I don’t pick up. It goes quiet, then beeps with a message. Then rings again.

I need to get out of here.

“Amir, I need the list of the deceased. They won’t release it for a while. Call the White House. Call Dad’s secretaries, the congressmen, whoever—you have the numbers. All of them. I need the info before it’s released to the press. You know the whole world will be calling in minutes.”

He nods. “Some already did. This happened half an hour ago.”

“Give me some time. I need to be somewhere quieter.”

I turn and leave, Marlow following.

Outside, the sound of the party music in the distance creates a strange spell.

Can’t be.

Not my dad.

Not right now.

I jump on the scooter and zoom toward my villa. Marlow and Slate follow, and inside, I just stand in the center of the living room and stare at the floor, trying to think, but there are no thoughts.

“Here.” Marlow presses a drink into my hand, and I chug it. Another drink appears in my hand.

“Arch, I’m so sorry,” Marlow says.

Slate stands by the door like he is blocking me from escaping.

“It’s no one’s fault. It’s... Weird,” I exhale in a whisper, trying to figure out how I feel.

My phone rings again. I don't pick up. Marlow does and passes it to me. "It's Amir."

His stare is unblinking as I take the phone out of his hand and press it to my ear. "Yes, Amir," I say quietly as if afraid to wake up a monster.

"Just got off the phone with the White House Chief of Staff. The Secretary sent a message to them two minutes before the explosion. His security card was swiped on the third floor twenty minutes before." Amir pauses for a second that is too heavy. "He was at the Assembly, Archer," he says quieter.

I hang up.

No family.

The thought is bewildering. Lonely. Devastating. But in the gentlest way. Like a whisper. That's how the worst news is often said—in a low voice. They need to touch you gently before they assault you with full force.

"I think I need a moment alone," I say.

Marlow slowly smooths his hair as he looks at me from under his eyebrows like it's his fault. "Hey, if you need anything, I'll be at the Center, yeah? I'll call and check on you."

I don't answer, hear Marlow and Slate leave, and just stand there, wondering if I am cursed.

KAT

MARLOW AND SLATE ARE WALKING ACROSS THE FRONT LAWN OF CLIFF Villa when I storm by.

“Kat!”

“Not now!” I blurt and stomp into the villa.

My eyes burn with tears.

That was the last straw. Sharing the picture of me was just weak. And if it wasn’t Archer, even showing it to someone or taking it without my consent was just wrong.

And when it goes viral at the party, Archer disappears. Because it’s easier to brush me away than admit once again that he is a prick.

Archer stands in the middle of the living room with a drink in his hand, quiet and staring at me like I came to slaughter him.

Oh, I will.

“Number one,” I say as I stop ten feet away from him, hands on my waist. “The fact that you took a screenshot of me while I was on cam is beneath you. Or so I thought. But I guess I was wrong.”

“Kat, you are not—”

“Then you shared that picture with someone? Really? Wow! Is that the sort of shit you do when your ego wants revenge?” I lift my chin.

He frowns, his voice strangely low when he says, “I didn’t share it.”

I don’t believe it. “Really, Archer, you could’ve been a decent human for once, yeah?”

“You are not listening, Kat—”

“You know what? Doesn’t matter,” I lie. It matters but it’s useless to tell him that. He sets up his chessboard for a game, and when the pieces are gone, he sets up a new one. On repeat. I am just one of the pieces. And he is not even willing to shake hands decently when it’s over.

“Kat, listen, tell me about it later. Right now is—”

“Oh, you take a picture that’s mysteriously leaked to your fanbase but, no, let’s not talk about it. You are fucking selfish, Archer!” I shout, stabbing my forefinger in the air at him. “We had a thing going on. Not serious, fine. A fling, I understand. You can’t bond with people, understandable. But no, you can’t be just a good guy taking what you want and rolling with it. You need to teach me a lesson and humiliate me.”

“Kat! Stop!” he shouts, and I draw a breath in shock. “Stop talking right now. Please.”

Is he for real?

“Stop talking?” There is no stopping me. Emotions clog my chest. “Why? Because everything is more important than me?” He closes his eyes and rakes his hand through his hair. “That’s how it is with you, Archer. You have no consideration for others.”

“Can you let me speak?”

“No!” I snap, feeling my chest shake. If I let him speak, I’ll cry. I can barely hold back tears. “You are a beautiful selfish prick. You take what you want, then toss the person away. Without a single flying fuck. Just like with Olivia.”

His eyes widen, and I glare at him in triumph.

“What the fuck, Kat,” he breathes.

I don’t even know exactly what happened to Olivia. The Eastsiders don’t talk about it. Marlow doesn’t either. All I know is that Olivia was abducted by the Savages, and somewhere before they reached the Ashlands, she was assaulted and killed by a group of men.

I can’t imagine.

I don’t want to.

But I am not the first one to accuse Archer of not sending help. He praises himself for keeping this island safe. But only when it suits him.

“You have cameras all over this island,” I say sharply. “You parade your guards like a fucking dictator. But when someone else gets hurt, you don’t bother to lift a finger.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about.” His voice is barely a rasp.

“No? Olivia does. But she is dead. Yeah? Because who cares about others when you have yachts and escorts and your billion-dollar business that caters to the wealthy assholes?” I feel my chest tighten and a lump in my throat. “Who cares about others’ feelings when they are just...”

I hold back a sob.

My eyes burn with tears because he doesn’t answer.

Because I am right.

Because I thought we had something going on.

Because the silent treatment is too hurtful.

And the dance an hour ago gave me a little hope, though I am not sure what I am hoping for.

This man rips my confidence into shreds, leaving me yearning for something I can’t quite explain. I want to kill him and fuck him. I want to spend hours alone with him talking and laughing and touching him. And I want to leave and never see him again.

But we are apples from different trees and never had a chance at anything but sex. And that—*that*—is the most painful thought that drowns me every moment of every day when he is around.

“You don’t have a single friend, Archer,” I say, hearing my voice cracking and desperately trying to hold back tears as I start retreating toward the door. “Because you don’t care about people. And when they realize that, they walk away. Every. Single. One of them. And it serves you right.”

“Kat, please,” he says almost in a whisper, just standing there, staring at me, quiet and composed as always. Making me mad.

I take another step back.

“Please, let me finish what I came here for. As quickly as possible. And I am off this island. I promise. I don’t want to ever see you again after this.”

I turn around and leave, silence following me all the way to the door.

ARCHER

I STAND DUMBFOUNDED AND NUMB. THIS EVENING IS SOME FUCKED UP retribution for every mistake I ever made. Every person I ever hurt. Every wrong word I ever said.

The phone rings, and I pick it up by reflex.

“Does she know yet?” Marlow is like a mediator between us. But I don’t need a mediator—Kat just told me what she truly thinks of me.

“Who cares,” I blurt, feeling strangely dizzy.

“Arch, do you want me to bring her back? Do you want me to stay with you? Let’s go to the Center. Or the beach. Anywhere. Some—”

“Stop-stop-stop. Nick, please.” I palm my face. Calling him by his name is a slip-up, but his voice is suddenly too foreign, slicing through the vacuum inside me. Everything—outside, inside, my heart—feels empty. “I need some time alone, okay? Keep everyone away from me. I need a moment.”

“Sure.”

He says something else but I drop the call.

Immediately, the phone rings again—Congressman Reich.

I drop it.

It rings again—Margot.

I kill the call.

It beeps with a message, then another, then another, and I turn it to silent mode and tell Corlo to lock the door.

I pour myself a glass of cognac to the brim, drink it slowly but steadily, and when the glass is empty, I pour another one.

“Corlo, dim the lights.”

Theoretically, I know the sequence of bad news. You have an influx of cortisol. You think about it more and more, it stockpiles in your brain, changing the chemical reaction, decreasing the production of dopamine and serotonin, plunging your mood lower.

Psychologically, this means you withdraw yourself from reality first, then avoid your feelings, then jump headfirst in, start attacking and blaming yourself, then others.

I exhale heavily, trying to keep myself under control.

I could get drunk.

Puke the bad news out later.

Spit anger with vomit onto the floor.

Punch the walls that won't bear a trace of it tomorrow.

For some time, I stand by the window that overlooks the deck and infinity pool and stare at the darkness ahead, the yacht lights, and farther into the blackness.

There's an entire world beyond this island. A world full of pain but also happiness. And not a single person out there that I can share the grief with.

Is it grief I feel? I'm not sure. Not yet. I try not to lose my shit. I know how to control my emotions.

I know.

I know how.

I know how to deal with things.

But the word seems out of place.

Twelve years ago, when Mom and Adam died, I remember roaring, crying, and lashing out at Dad, who brought the news, like it was his fault.

Now all I feel is emptiness.

The whole world is gonna try to reach out to me with their insincere condolences, more concerned for Gen-Alpha than anything else. My father was the core of it all. No one is irreplaceable—*his* words—but tomorrow is going to be a transformation. People are less concerned with his death than with extra inconvenience because of it.

Sad, really.

Do I want to deal with it? No.

Sadness doesn't make sense. Shock, maybe, confusion. We spent so little time together in the past years that I've always felt alone. *This* alone doesn't feel the same, and I try to analyze it.

Being alone is a different kind of pain. It's transcendent. Bishop once told me it makes you stronger. It takes all the feelings you would share with others and projects them into yourself.

Feeling alone when you are surrounded by others though adds extra grit.

I'm not sure I want to feel strong. It's exhausting. I wonder what it's like to be old, really old when you've lost every single loved one, dear friends, family, even people who are younger than you.

How is that not hell?

I don't want to grow old.

Who wants that burden?

The sudden sound of an explosion and sharp whistling in the distance outside jerks my attention to the window.

Fireworks.

Another one shoots in the air, and I chuckle and can't stop as I feel my eyes burn.

Fucking fireworks!

It's one of the worst nights of my life, and there is a celebration.

Hoorah!

I lean forward and press my forehead to the cool window.

It's a crazy thought, but I take the phone out of my pocket. There are fifteen missed calls and twenty-five messages. But I go to the phone directory and dial Dad.

The fireworks explode in the sky, the sound muffled by the glass between me and the rest of the world.

The phone goes straight to voicemail.

I try again. Same result.

Again. Nothing.

But I knew it. Yet the hope that Dad's death is a mistake is still there. The fireworks, the party—the world can't be that happy when your loved ones die.

I do the most illogical thing—send Dad a message.

Me: Dad, call me back.

Mom once said, *"You often live through the deepest feelings while the world seems at its shallowest."*

This is an awful thought, but I'm glad she didn't see the Change. She was too beautiful and kind to witness what the world turned into. How vicious we humans have grown. How those of us who have money spend it

on the wrong things. How those who have nothing are willing to use violence to get what they need. How much it hurts to lose the ones you love, however you define love.

I gulp the drink, then walk to the bar and make another one.

It's not Dad but Mom who is on my mind now, her smile that I remember in every detail because it comes from the few pictures I keep on me all the time.

So I walk to the drawer across from the bar, press my fingertip to the scanner, and pick up the familiar pictures.

Mom is always so happy on the pictures—that's how I remember her, her smile.

So is little Adam.

Even Dad. That was the happiest I've ever seen him. When Mom died, something in him died too. An invisible tie between us snapped, and he was just a grownup man guiding an estranged young man through life. Without unnecessary emotions. Without care. Like it was an obligation.

That's what probably made me so messed up in the head after the Change. Droga wasn't there either. Technically, I didn't have a single person I could be close with. I drove my friends away. Stopped giving a shit.

So much for a brilliant brain and money.

And that's when Mom's words come to mind.

You are so talented, Archie. So brave. You take my breath away.

Dad never said those things to me.

One day, you'll take on the world, and it will watch in awe as you show what you are capable of.

I take another sip, remembering Mom's gentle touch ruffling my hair that I was always so embarrassed about. What teen is not embarrassed by their parents' affection? I would've given the world for it now—this fucked up world that she wanted me to wow.

Mom, it's not worth a fraction of your smile.

"Corlo, play 'Vienna' by Billy Joel on repeat," I say.

Mom knew the lyrics by heart. Often sang along at the top of her voice in her car to me and Adam. Adam used to giggle.

"Archer! It's about you, sweetie." She laughs loudly and sings along.

I used to roll my eyes. Always rolled my eyes at everything.

Tears burn my eyes, blurring the pictures of the family that doesn't exist anymore.

My chest tightens.

And here come the real fucking predators—guilt and regret that clasp my chest in an iron grip. They always come back, no matter how much time passes.

And the memories.

Mom's voice—so soothing, her smile always warm, her dreams for me always larger than life.

One day, Archie, you will shine brighter than the sun. You will be strong and powerful and lead others with kindness. You will have a beautiful girl you will love so much it will make your heart beat wildly. And she will hold your hand and love you back for the amazing person you are.

Right.

A powerful asshole who leads with a whip, hides his emotions in a bottle of booze, and has the most beautiful girl he's ever met who despises him.

My heart twists into a knot.

Look at me, Mom.

Tears start coming, and I down the rest of my drink, spilling some of it on my chest.

You know what they say about your twenty-four-year-old prodigious son, Mom?

He is too handsome to be sad. He made too much money to worry about life. He has too much power to wish for anything. He has it all. What else can he possibly want?

Love—so fucking banal, so simple—of a mother, father, brother, a friend. Just an ounce of compassion. A drop of affection. A little fucking understanding of what it's like to be responsible for so many others without anyone to lean on.

But you know what a wise man said? Don't expect anything you can't give in return.

You left too early to teach me how to give, Mom. Dad only taught me how to take. It's a vicious circle.

Just like Kat said—I am a beautiful selfish prick.

I drop the pictures into the drawer. My secrets' keeper. It holds all the important things.

I just need one.

Fuck you, Zion. I have more money than I can ever spend, yet, I've lived here like a prisoner in the last years, feared and hated, trying to help humanity.

I reach into another drawer and carefully pick up the most lethal weapon of all—a syringe and a small vial of liquid heroin. It looks black, like death.

Me and this—we go way back.

I did this several times before, after Droga's accident, to see what it was like. In truth, I was being reckless on purpose, drowning the guilt. It was eye-opening. Took me a while to get off that shit and kill the urge to use again.

But now...

Now a different word comes to mind.

Not pleasure, no—euthanasia.

I want to fold. I'm just so tired of it all...

They say suicide is a weapon of the weak and selfish.

Nah. They don't know shit. It's just a means to ease pain. An escape. A way to make the world shut up. It's just that simple. In a world of injustice, it seems like the justest weapon.

I bring the paraphernalia to the couch, light a cigarette, and sit down on the floor, my back against the couch. The floor is cold, and it cools my burning brain.

I open the syringe and the vial and draw the liquid, more than I need, without measuring.

The syringe is hypnotic. There is a sense of danger in every needle—whether it's a cure or a death sentence. Humans can withstand years of torture, but a tiny needle can end a life in seconds. It's scary and... fascinating.

My heart pumps at the idea, but there is too much pain and grief wrapping its tentacles around my neck, suffocating me.

I take a long drag of a cigarette, enjoying the sharp burn in my lungs, and set it on the edge of the coffee table.

For once, instead of charging like a shark at things and taking what I want by force, I am running away from it all.

I bring the tip of the needle to my vein—I know them by heart, I don't need to pump.

The metal end doesn't feel scary.

Neither does the prickle when it punctures my skin.

Nor does the black liquid that drains into my blood, spreading pleasurable warmth through my limbs.

Everyone was right about me but you, Mom. Sorry. Your talented Archie didn't quite make the cut.

I close my eyes and smile as blood carries the poison to my heart.

Finally, I feel at peace.

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KAT

I AM HURT MORE THAN MAD.

“Fuck you, Archer,” I murmur on repeat as I stomp on my high heels along the main road through the resort.

He plays God, and on this island, he might as well be. But he has no heart.

My eyes burn with tears.

I’ve walked around the resort for a while, blowing off steam. The fireworks start, and the bright colorful flashes are in a stark contrast to my miserable mood.

Then they end. So does the music in the distance. It’s too early, and I wonder if Archer cut off the party. I wouldn’t be surprised.

I regret what I said about Olivia. He’s not responsible for every shitty thing that happens.

Why did he raise his voice at me then?

“Kat!” Marlow turns me around roughly, making me jump, and I jerk my arm out of his grip.

“What the hell, dude?” Deep in my thoughts, I didn’t hear him approach. *Asshole*. I could’ve punched him.

But his gaze is alarmed. “Sorry, it’s—”

“What happened to the party?”

He is panting. He doesn’t look right. “You haven’t heard yet?”

“Heard what?”

“Secretary Crone.”

“What about him?”

Marlow swallows hard without looking away. "There was a terrorist attack on the International Assembly. He was one of hundreds who died."

The words deafen me. I frown and shake my head.

"Two hours ago," he adds almost in a whisper.

Wait.

Wait-wait-wait.

"Archer's dad?" I ask, still trying to process the news. It seems like a while before the realization hits me. "Does Archer know?" I say quieter, my heart sinking.

Marlow nods and exhales, running his hand along the top of his head.

My stomach plummets like a rocket, a nasty feeling gathering inside. I feel like throwing up.

"When did he find out?" I ask almost in a whisper.

Marlow is quiet.

"Marlow!" I shout and fist his shirt at his chest, jerking him toward me.

"When did he find out?"

My head is spinning, because I might've just made the biggest mistake of my life.

"About an hour ago! You were just with him. Didn't he tell you?" Marlow shouts back, jerking my hand away, then says, quieter, "Fuck. We are all fucked. This island is fucked. He is, too."

My hand drops, and so does my heart. So low that my knees buckle.

"Oh, no," I whisper.

I don't care about everyone or the island. But Archer... He *knew* before I came to talk to him. And I screamed in his face. And didn't let him say a word. And—

"Oh, God... I screwed up, Nick..."

I turn and start walking toward Cliff Villa.

"Kat!" Marlow shouts behind me.

I turn, walking backward. "Why aren't you with him?" I shout back angrily, feeling my eyes burn with tears.

Of all the people who *should've* been with Archer when he found out the news, *I* should've been there. *I was* there, hurting him at his lowest.

I want to scream at myself for being so selfish.

I stop abruptly, take off my heels, toss them onto the side of the road, and break into a sprint, disregarding the pain of my feet hitting the pebbles.

I know Archer.

I've seen his pain before.

I know his dark habits.

It doesn't matter that he doesn't care about me. This time, I screwed up. Half an hour ago, I was the worst kind of friend, or acquaintance, or whatever I am to him—doesn't matter. Nothing matters in this moment. Definitely not my injured pride. I showed my ugliest side, kicking him when he was already wounded.

Hold on, Archer. Please...

Two minutes up the hill and I sprint through the gates of Cliff Villa, praying that everything is fine.

It's all disturbingly quiet. There should be people here right now. Archer's bike is at the door, but no one else is around.

Where the hell is everyone!?

Why isn't anyone with him right now?

He made this island what it is, but during the darkest moment, there is no one next to him. Not even me.

Let's talk, Archer! Let's go through this together! I'm here!

I keep talking to him in my mind as I jerk the front door handle, but it's locked, and I feverishly punch the code, squeeze through the opening door, and dart into the dim living room.

"Vienna" by Billy Joel is playing.

There is an eerie calmness in the room like the air was sucked out of it.

Archer sits on the floor with his head tilted back onto the couch, eyes closed.

"Arch?" I say softly, walking even softer like I'm going to wake him up.

He looks peaceful but doesn't move.

Billy Joel's piano tune trickles through the room, enveloping it into a happy lullaby.

A cigarette, burnt down to a stub with a tail of ash, is on the coffee table.

And—

A syringe on the floor...

The hair stands up on the back of my head. It's a feeling, rather than the knowledge that something about this is horribly wrong.

"Archer!" I say louder.

Silence.

My hurried footsteps toward him are louder than the music.

I fall to my knees next to him and freeze in horror.
My heart slams in my chest. The silence around makes it worse.
Because when I bring my shaking fingers to his neck, the pulse is barely there.
Fading with every beat.
Leaving his beautiful body...

*All right, lovely people. Hold up! We are not quite there yet, because **WILD THING**, book 4 in **RUTHLESS PARADISE**, is coming soon. So let's break your hearts one more time, yeah? We'll stitch them back together, I promise.
With tears and kisses and hot scenes.*

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RUTHLESS PARADISE SERIES

BOOK 1: OUTCAST

BOOK 2: PETAL

BOOK 3: CHANCELLOR

BOOK 4: WILD THING

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