



VICIOUS KINGS

THE DARK ELITE: BOOK 1

EVA ASHWOOD

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THE DARK ELITE #1

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GRACE

I PROP my shaking arm on the vanity as I swipe on a touch of lip gloss. My honey-blonde hair is pulled back in a simple updo, with a few curled tendrils framing my face. My hazel eyes are accented by tasteful eyeshadow and mascara that highlights my long lashes.

The look is understated. Classic.

The picture of an innocent bride.

So why the hell am I so fucking nervous?

I really shouldn't be getting anxious about something I've been looking forward to for months, but now that my wedding day is here, my insides are in a twist. My hands won't stop shaking, and I don't know if it's just typical wedding day jitters or something else.

I love Brian. Otherwise, I wouldn't have agreed to marry him. If I didn't completely love him, I wouldn't be here right now, minutes away from walking down the aisle and marrying him. We've been together for over two years, our sex life is decent, and the next step after spending a few years in a relationship is marriage. Because that's what people do.

Isn't it?

Ever since my life changed in the blink of an eye when I was sixteen, when I was yanked out of the violent, dark world I grew up in, I've always tried a little too hard to be "normal." To fit the textbook definition of the average American life. And getting married is a part of that.

That's not why you're doing it though, Grace, I remind myself. That would be crazy.

I'm getting married because I'm in love. Because I want to start a family soon. Because I'm ready for this next step.

Right?

My hazel eyes seem a shade darker, larger than they usually are, and I shake my head at my reflection, shooting her a quelling look.

"Stop it," I whisper at the woman in the mirror, clenching the lip gloss between my fingers. "Just stop it."

I draw in a breath and force myself to unclench my hand, setting the tube down gently on the vanity. I just need to stop worrying. In a few hours, it'll all be over. I'll be happily married and on my way to a nice Canadian cabin with Brian, wrapped up in bliss.

From the outside, my life looks pretty perfect already. I went to college and came out with straight A's and no debt—thank goodness for scholarships—have a business degree, a good job lined up, and I'm getting married to a handsome law enforcement officer who will keep me safe. In a few years, we'll have kids. Cute kids with blue eyes like Brian and chubby cheeks...

The door behind me gently creaks open, and my gaze snaps up to the mirror, catching sight of my father. He smiles when our gazes meet, and a wave of emotion washes over me at the sight of him all dressed up in a suit. He looks handsome and dapper. I haven't seen him in a suit in years, although he used to wear them all the time.

Back before we moved to Washington.

Back in the other life we never talk about.

Six years ago, we moved from Chicago to Washington, traveling off the grid and staying low. We were running from our past lives, running from the death of my mother, the wars of blood... the mafia.

Seeing my father looking so much like that old version of himself makes a pit form in my stomach, but I push it away.

Today isn't a day to be focusing on the past.

Only the future.

Dad gives me a small wave and creeps into the room, closing the door behind him. I watch him through the mirror, biting my bottom lip and probably messing up the gloss I just applied.

"Grace, you look beautiful. I can't believe my little girl is getting married." His usually deep voice is a little gruffer than usual, and I know

he's fighting back emotion just like I am.

I turn around in my seat. "Dad, stop." Trying to laugh, I blink away the tears welling in the corners of my eyes. "You're going to make me cry."

"I'm proud of you, honey." He squats next to my seat and grasps my hands, pulling them to his chest. His solid heartbeat comforts me, and I suddenly realize how damn lucky I am to still have him with me. He's all I have left. "For once... I'm at a loss for words."

"Proud of me for what, doing something everyone else does?" I attempt to joke, speaking my earlier thoughts aloud. "Getting married? Doesn't seem that hard these days."

"For recovering," he says seriously. "For flourishing. For making the best of the bad times and coming out stronger than ever. I'm proud of you for putting up with all of my bullshit."

What he means is the running, the moving, the not knowing where we were going to sleep next. It took us almost a full year to get completely back on our feet after leaving the mafia, a full year of memories we both tune out.

"I'd do it again for you, Dad. You know that."

"Your mother would be proud too." Heavy sadness weighs on his voice. She died six years ago, just before we fled Chicago, but I know he still misses her every day. I do too. "I wish she could be here to see you."

"Me too."

"I think she must be looking down on you today."

Clasping my hands in his, my father places a tender kiss to my knuckles, like a benediction. When he stands up, his knees pop with the movement.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you are turning into an old man," I tease.

"Oh hush." He cracks a smile. He gives me a flick on the chin like he used to do when I was a little girl. "You know I'm still as spry as a man in his twenties. Cool too."

To prove his point, he cocks an eyebrow at me and slicks back his hair, turning on his heels smoothly. He's aged well, still carrying the look of a classic American movie star, and the older ladies love him for it.

"Right. Just don't embarrass me by tripping down the aisle. Or dancing down it," I say with a warning tone. He gives me an innocent wink and slips

out, shutting the door behind him. As the door closes on his chuckle, I catch my reflection again.

My expression looks lighter, happier, less pinched. Seeing my dad helped calm me down, quieting the little voice of doubt and worry in my mind.

I rarely think about the time before now, but just briefly talking about our past lives brings back a rush of memories. Before we left Chicago, my dreams were completely different—so different that I feel like I don't even know the girl I left behind. The mafia princess became a picture perfect suburban woman in just a few years.

There was a small part of me that didn't want to leave when my father dragged me away, that was consumed with the life of the mafia. But how is a sixteen-year-old girl to know what's best for her?

If we hadn't left Chicago, what would my life have turned into?

One thing is for sure, I wouldn't be in such a hurry to get married or settle down. I would want to—

I cut off that thought before I can even finish it. There's no point thinking about the life I left behind. Or the people.

Not even the ones who kept a piece of my heart with them.

Shit.

Now is not the time to be getting cold feet.

My hands clasp the locket at my neck on instinct, popping it open with my thumb. I look down at the familiar and worn picture it holds, a picture of a woman who looks just like me—hazel eyes, blonde hair that glints with natural highlights. The only feature I took from my father was his smile, and he'd never say this, but I know sometimes my dad has a hard time even looking at me. I remind him of Mom too much. Of everything he lost when she died.

"I hope you're proud," I murmur suddenly. Then I shake my head, wrapping my hand around the locket. "No. I *know* you're proud. This is the life you must've wanted for me."

No mother wants her child to grow up in the mafia, a place where a child may become a bidding piece. A pawn on a chessboard. Bait or blackmail.

I mean, just look at what a rival syndicate did to my mother...

They killed her.

I clasp the locket shut, knowing I've made the right choice to settle down and marry Brian.

This is the life I've chosen, and I'm happy with it.

JUST LIKE WE practiced last night, I think, grasping my father's arm. I can feel him shaking slightly, which makes a small smile cross my lips. My father is never nervous. Only a few times in my entire twenty-two years have I ever seen nerves get the best of him.

"You ready, Dad?" I ask, not taking my eyes off the church door in front of us. Everything I see has a soft filter around it, the white veil covering my face giving the world an almost ethereal glow.

"I feel like I should be asking you that." He grips me a little tighter and I feel him turn to look down at me. "You're not nervous at all?"

"Nope. Got all my jitters out already." I give him a reassuring smile just as the doors open and the first strains of the *Wedding March* begin on the piano.

Even though my dad and I have been living a simple life for the past six years, my wedding certainly isn't small. The shuffle of people turning in the church pews to watch my father and me walk down the aisle sends a new jolt of nerves through my stomach, but when I meet Brian's eyes from across the church, everything settles.

There he is. This is right.

Brian doesn't know my full history. He knows that my father and I had a rough year before I started college, but he thinks it was money problems and not anything to do with running from the mafia.

I suppose I should feel bad for lying to him, for keeping things from my future husband, but my father has ingrained that habit in me since the day we left Chicago. It's not safe for anyone to know who we were before we became the Taylors. The surname Weston has been scrubbed from every part of my identity, and I'll never go by that name again.

Soon enough, I'll take Brian's name anyway, and I'll be one more step removed from the girl I used to be.

My soon-to-be husband beams at me as I walk down the aisle toward him. He looks as handsome as ever—classically attractive, well-built, blue eyes, blond hair.

His smile grows lopsided as I approach the dais at the front of the church, one corner of his lips lifting higher than the other in a grin I know so well. I smile back, hoping he can see it through the gauzy film of my veil. I don't know what I was so nervous about—

Crash!

There's a burst of sound, and my steps falter. My entire body tenses at the sudden loud noise.

I flinch as my father instinctively pulls me behind him.

My heart lurches in my chest and my knees nearly buckle at the sight of the suited men who suddenly fill the church from all sides—behind us, in front of us, to each side.

And when they look at my father, I know they're not here to speak now or forever hold their peace.

GRACE

POP! Pop! Pop!

The pop of gunfire is not a sound that should be at my wedding, and the sharp noises make me freeze in shock for a half-second. It isn't until I begin to register the sounds of screaming around me that I grasp the reality of the situation with awful clarity.

Something is wrong. Terribly wrong.

A hum of adrenaline crawls over my skin as another round of shots ring out. The world seems to move in slow motion, and I can see and hear and feel everything more intensely than I should be able to.

Bullets zip across the room like angry bees. Wood splinters and cracks as gunfire hits the pews, sending people scrambling for cover.

My father grasps my arm so tight it hurts, and it's that bite of pain that shocks me out of my stasis. He seems rooted to the spot just like I was, color draining from his face as he watches the scene, registering the group of men we were never supposed to see again. After six years of running, the demons of our past seem to have finally caught up to us—a day that was never supposed to come.

We're standing in the middle of the room, halfway up the aisle, and I throw myself to the floor, yanking him down with me as another volley of bullets flies through the air.

There are so many intruders in the church, and I can't tell if they're firing at us, the wedding guests, or each other. But it doesn't matter.

It's no coincidence they're here in this church on my wedding day. They came for Dad. For us.

You told me we would be safe now.

I look over at my father, tugging his arm to try to pull him behind the cover of a wooden pew. It was foolish to believe the Novak Syndicate would never find us, but I still feel a stab of betrayal, like my father lied to me.

"Dad—"

The words die on a scream as my father's body jerks, collapsing to the side as one of the intruders fires around the end of the pew in a burst of noise.

"Dad!" I scream, blood rushing to my ears.

My mind spins. The world goes red.

My father goes still.

No. My heart gives a single, solid thud in my chest. No.

"Please..."

The sounds around me continue to rage, the danger still looming over me like a guillotine, but I can't focus on any of that. All I can focus on is my only remaining parent, my lifeline, my *father* bleeding out on the floor. My fingers scrabble at his neck, slick with blood as I try to find a pulse. I can't find one, but maybe that's just because my fingers are too slippery, my own heart hammering so hard it seems to drown out everything else.

"Dad, please..."

My white dress tangles around our limbs and knots at my ankles as I try to drag his body with me to an exit, to get him to safety. He's too heavy for me to move fast enough, and I know it's too late— his body is limp and lifeless, his head falling to the side, eyes open wide in horror. The splatter of his blood stains my dress, turning the white fabric crimson.

"Please..." I cry, silently, ducking behind a pew.

My body is so frozen in fear as I lift my shaking hands to my vision, watching the blood drip down my hands and wrists to my elbows. There's a tingling cold in my fingertips as they start to go numb, a sensation that goes from my hands to my arms to my chest, washing over my entire body.

Pop!

A scream catches in my throat as another bullet embeds itself in the pew inches away from my face, wood splintering. I know I should leave my

father's body behind, that there's nothing left to save, but my gaze is pulled back to where his tall form is sprawled on the floor.

Unconsciously, my hand floats to my head where my veil should be when I see that he still holds it tightly in his hand. It must have torn from my head as we dropped to the church floor; the fresh white roses that made up the crown of the veil are smeared with blood, the petals crushed and broken.

I have to fight... I need to get away.

Fresh tears stream down my face as I turn away, dragging my body across the floor.

Where are you, Brian? I try to keep my focus in front of me, wondering where my knight in shining armor is. Is he even still alive? Or did they kill him too?

"Not so fast, sweetheart," a voice says behind me.

Pop!

My body absorbs the impact of the bullet, pain following seconds later. Fire rips through the side of my body as I grasp my hip, trying to stop the blood, but it spills through my fingers, hot and thick. A pair of boots come down on my dress as I try to pull away, stopping me in my tracks. I've taken self-defense classes. I'm no stranger to violence. I should be able to fight him.

But with every breath I take, pain pulses and radiates throughout my entire body.

"No..." I gasp, turning around and looking at a face I don't recognize. "Please..."

He smirks, lifting his gun and pointing it at my head.

My ears ring as my assailant jerks and stumbles forward, three shots penetrating his stomach in quick succession, blood splattering my face and chest. His smirk turns to a grimace and his eyes widen in pain as he looks down at his wounds, catching the blood with his hands.

But it's too late for him.

His body crumples to the floor right in front of me. As he collapses, his weapon skims across the floor, just within my reach.

Get the gun.

I lurch forward, desperation and adrenaline overriding the pain in my side as I grasp for the handgun. The barrel of the gun barely brushes my

fingers before a heavy boot comes down on my wrist, making my arm scream in agony. The new man kicks the weapon out of my reach, sending it flying across the room.

Hope fades with it.

No...

“Don’t be afraid, Grace,” a male voice mutters, but there’s an edge of something dangerous in the words.

Before I can turn around and see who he is, the man heaves me up and throws me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. He moves quickly, holding my body in place with one hand and firing with the other, moving quickly through the chaos of the church. I barely register his suit and bloodstained shoes, or the muscled shoulder that digs into my wound, before we’re out of the church and plunged into the pink-tinged twilight.

I’m tossed into the back of a black van, my body thudding painfully against the seat. Stars explode in my vision. I know this is the only chance I’ll have to get out of here, to try to escape, but the precious seconds before he gets into the passenger seat and slams the door shut are wasted trying to cope with the pain.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

My breath is shallow as the van roars to life. Hands crawl over my body, binding my wrists and legs, and I jerk and twist in his grasp, even though it sends new bolts of pain shooting through me.

“No need to panic,” that same dark voice says.

My gaze snaps to his, my vision clearing for a moment as I register the owner of the voice.

My heart goes dead in my chest. I catch sight of dark blue eyes and a twisted smirk as the man hovering over me tugs at the tie around his throat, yanking it off before wrapping it around my mouth and gagging me.

Hale.

And if Hale is here...

I painfully turn my head to the front of the van, catching sight of an impassive face in the front passenger seat. It’s painfully blank, almost unrecognizable from the boy I knew so long ago.

Ciro.

The van spins out of the parking lot as the sound of sirens wail in our wake, seconds too late. The police are on the way. Help is on the way. But

they can't help me now.

That realization makes a wave of nausea churn my stomach, sending bile rushing up my throat. I retch.

"Don't fucking puke on my seats," Hale murmurs, glaring at me.

Something white-hot and angry flares in my chest. I try to kick him, but he catches my feet without flinching, holding my ankles tightly. His skin on my bare legs sends a flash of sparks shooting through my body, but no matter how hard I buck, he won't let me shake off his burning touch.

"Slow down, Zaid," Hale instructs, still watching me. "If she pukes, you're cleaning it up."

No. Zaid can't be here too.

But he is. A flash of green eyes catch mine in the rearview mirror, and I can tell without seeing his face that he's smirking. As if this is all a hilarious prank they're playing, instead of a fucking bloodbath.

But where is Lucas?

Wherever one of the twins goes, the other follows. They're inseparable, closer than anyone, perhaps *too* close. What one of them has, the other one gets... including women.

Including me.

A vivid barrage of memories floods my mind, making my heart pound painfully against my ribs, as if it can't stand being locked in my chest anymore. I've thought about the night I shared with the two of them more than I care to admit, but right now, the memories of heated kisses and soft groans only make me feel more sick.

I struggle against Hale's hold with everything I have, lashing out with my elbows and knees and bound feet, trying to wriggle away from his hold on me. I scream around the gag, but I can't seem to get enough oxygen. My eyelids droop even as my pulse races, oblivion chasing me.

"Stop fucking fighting me, Grace," he grunts, his expression darkening. "I need to patch you up. Unless you want to bleed out in my fucking car?"

Go to hell.

I can't say the words around the gag, but I lift my chin in defiance, staring at him with pure wrath. If he's giving me the choice between living through my current situation and dying right now, I'm not so sure I shouldn't take the latter option.

Death.

Simple. Peaceful. Final.

I may have spent the last six years going soft, but I was raised in the mafia. I was raised not to bow to anyone. Not to give up without a fight. So even though I can feel sticky liquid soaking through the fabric of my dress, I continue to struggle against Hale's painfully tight grip.

"Stupid girl," he mutters.

Seconds later, darkness consumes me.

HALE

GRACE'S WEIGHT settles into my arms as her eyes roll back in her head, her body going limp in my grip as pain and blood loss drag her under.

My head spins with the sight of her, the smell of her, the feel of her against my body and in my arms. Everything about her is familiar and foreign at the same damn time, and that strange dichotomy creates a hot rush that goes straight from my head and settles with a dangerous calm in my bones. It takes every ounce of willpower I have to set her down on the seat and not pull her into my lap, to feel more of her, to touch every inch of her.

What the hell? Focus up, asshole.

I grit my teeth, annoyed at my own physical reaction.

I've hated Grace with every bone in my body for the past six years—her father is the reason my uncle is rotting in prison for life, and the reason why everything went to shit six years ago.

Still, Grace has always held a power over me, one I've never quite understood. She didn't even know it all those years ago, but she had me on a string. Grace has always been beautiful—even when she was younger, she was intriguing. Stunning. She made my heart flip every time I saw her, sending a confusing mix of emotions rampaging through my chest.

Six years later, and she's still the same *Grace* that she's always been, but there's something different about her too.

Something even more dangerous than before.

Gone are her girlish looks, replaced with curves that could kill a man, lips that are meant for nothing but sin.

Something I should not touch.

But just like everyone else in this van, even I'm not above lust.

Desire.

I pull myself away from the thoughts that consume me, trying to get my fucking head on straight. To banish thoughts of how those curves would feel under my command. What noises those lips would make. What she would taste like. *Feel* like.

Those thoughts have no place in my goddamn mind, because they're dangerous. Grace represents exactly what I don't need right now.

Weakness.

Focus, Hale. Focus.

I assess her injuries, scanning her body for the source of her wounds. Her ivory dress is stained with blood in multiple places. She's either bleeding to death underneath the layers of fabric, or she's covered in someone else's blood.

Maybe both.

The wound at her side is still pulsing little rivulets of blood in time to the beat of her heart, and I wasn't kidding about the possibility of her bleeding out. At least now that she's unconscious, I can take care of her wound without her fighting me.

I reach for a handful of her dress, ripping it from her bodice straight to her waist.

Fuck.

Lust and regret wash over me simultaneously as I realize what a fucking mistake that action was. Of course she's wearing a fucking set of bridal lingerie, picked out especially for that asshole of a cop she was about to marry.

I try not to look, I really do.

But once I start, I can't stop.

Straps of ivory frame her waist and hip bones, resting flush against her skin, leaving little to the imagination. Her breasts are no better. Flowers made of delicate lace cover the soft, rosy buds of her nipples, hiding them from view just enough to make my cock twitch.

Unconsciously I brush my thumb over her hip, plunging it under one of those little straps at her waist, marveling at the softness of her skin.

“You could’ve just unzipped her dress,” *Ciro* says mildly from the front seat.

“Fuck off.”

Focus, focus, focus.

The church was a fucking nightmare, and it’s a fucking miracle she doesn’t have any more wounds than she got. Most of the blood on her dress has started drying, showing me that it’s someone else’s blood—most likely her father’s.

I follow a fresh stream of blood, thick and clotting, up to her waist.

“She’s been shot. Just one bullet, as far as I can see.” I’m careful not to touch her again as I observe the wound. “It’s just grazed her side, no shattered bones. Entered and exited.”

Without commenting, *Ciro* pops open the glove compartment and pulls out a box of medical supplies we keep for quick fixes, tossing it back to me. Even though I know I need to keep my hands away from her for my own goddamn sanity, I put pressure on her wound as I pop open the box, shuffling through bandages, antiseptics, needles, and thread.

You don’t grow up in the mafia without dealing with this kind of shit from time to time, so we all know the basics of fixing up wounds. *Ciro*’s better at injury assessment than I am, but he’s busy looking over digital notes, probably trying to figure out what we’re all wondering—what the *hell* went wrong today?

“You’ll probably have to do stitches when we get back, *Ciro*.” A bullet wound, especially one where the bullet isn’t embedded in her, is an easy fix, but stitches aren’t my specialty. “I’ll do what I can for now.”

A *thud* from the back of the van pulls my attention away from *Grace*. I look up just as *Lucas* speaks.

“Yeah. This fucker’ll live too. At least for now.” He wipes his bloody hands on his pants, stepping toward the front row of seats.

We’ve modified the back of the van, taken out the seats to leave an empty space back there. It’s useful for transporting prisoners or cargo, and it gives us more options in a pinch. Right now, a man’s body is slumped on the floor, his hands bound in shackles that connect to a bar on the side wall of the van.

Not that this asshole is going anywhere anytime soon. Our captive looks almost dead, although if Lucas says he'll live, I believe him.

"Who the hell is he?" Zaid asks, glancing into the review mirror to catch his brother's eye.

Even Ciro glances back at Lucas. We were all so focused on getting the hell out of that church before the cops showed up that we haven't even dealt with the most important question—who the hell was the second group that crashed the goddamn wedding?

It was supposed to be an easy job.

Get in, grab Samuel Weston—or Samuel *Taylor*, as he'd started going by—and get the fuck out.

We weren't supposed to take Grace.

And we weren't supposed to get shot at by another group of gunmen who were obviously well trained and well organized.

When everything started to go to shit, I gave the evacuation order, aborting the mission. Our target was gone anyway. I saw Samuel get shot, and I know he didn't fucking survive that.

Grace would've died too, if I hadn't killed the man who was about to take her down.

As for why I took her with me?

Well, I'll tell my father it's because I wasn't leaving the church without at least one member of the Weston family... even if I'm not entirely sure that's the only reason I threw her over my shoulder.

"I dunno who the fuck he is." Lucas jerks his head toward the man in the back. While I was busy chucking Grace into the van, he and Ciro grabbed a downed soldier from the other group and threw him in the back. "He's barely conscious, and I didn't want to rough him up too bad and risk killing him."

It's a good call. If we can keep him alive until we reach the safe house, we can patch him up a little and then let Ciro have a go at him. Interrogation is my second-in-command's specialty, and he approaches each job with a methodical precision that's both impressive and slightly stomach-turning to watch.

"Fuck. Bullet grazed me." Lucas swipes his hands on his pants again before poking at a small wound on his arm. He glances over at me. "Toss me some of those bandages."

I throw him a roll, and he begins to patch himself up one-handed, his gaze snagging on Grace as he does. He stills, and I can practically read the thoughts in his head—see his body flood with the same awareness I felt when I first looked at her. A sudden flare of jealousy tears through my chest. It's been a long time since we've all seen Grace, but I hate the annoyance and possessiveness that rises inside me like a beast as I watch him watch her.

She's not mine to possess.

She never fucking was.

And she never should be.

Reaching for the antiseptic, I pop it open, trying to focus back on my task and not on the thoughts clearly written on the lines of Lucas's face. Or in my head.

"This is going to hurt, sweetheart," I murmur, even though I know she's dead to the fucking world. Then I pour the liquid onto her wound to clean it.

Lucas and I cringe as her body immediately tenses in pain despite her unconsciousness, curling into herself. Her eyes flutter and her mouth falls open slightly, her back arching against the pain.

Swallowing, a sudden mad desire consumes me to see her do that again—not in pain, but in pleasure. My gaze tracks a path from the column of her throat to the swell of her breasts, my heart thudding in my chest. The pretty little gag around her pale lips makes me imagine all sorts of fucked up situations, all sorts of ways I want to fuck her.

Where I want to have her.

How I want to fuck her.

Would you beg for me? Would you beg me to make you scream? What would you look like when you finally gave in? The thoughts burn in my mind as my hand reaches out, brushing the gag.

Fuck.

Realizing what I'm doing, I yank my hand back and finish bandaging her wounds quickly, my touch rough and callous. Then I shift over on the seat, trying to put as much distance between us as possible. The cramped van seats don't offer much space.

"Did you get anything out of him?" I turn my attention back to Lucas, refocusing on what's important in this moment. "Who does he work for?"

“I have no clue. He was only lucid for a few seconds, and he didn’t give anything up.”

“What the fuck was he doing at the wedding?” I grit my teeth, the adrenaline that surged through me inside the church rushing back. “Actually, while we’re on the topic, someone want to tell me who the *fuck* compromised our mission?”

There’s a moment of quiet tension as we all contemplate the shit storm that happened back at the church. It’s amazing we all made it out of there alive, and maybe I should feel more grateful for that. But right now, rage is burning too hot through my veins to feel grateful for anything. What was supposed to be an easy in and out job turned into a shit show. Because what we were *supposed* to do was simply take Grace’s father and bring him back to Chicago, not cause a fucking bloodbath.

We’ve been looking for Grace and her father since they escaped six years ago, and when their location was finally discovered, Zaid, Lucas, Ciro, and I volunteered for the collection mission. It wasn’t even a fucking question. It was our duty. It was our *right*.

Samuel Weston was supposed to be ours.

“I don’t have a clue who the other group was.” Lucas breaks the silence. “Didn’t recognize a single one of them.”

“How did they even get there?” Zaid clenches his fingers against the steering wheel. He’s just as irritated as the rest of us, but his focus stays on the road, alert for any signs of someone following us. “We searched for Weston for six years. Our syndicate is the only one that found out where he was and what he was doing. We have a rat on the inside. Someone is giving out information.”

“And now Weston is fuckin’ dead.” Ciro grunts. “That seems to be the real problem.”

The van goes quiet again, and we all know he’s right.

Not only is our target dead, but our mission was compromised, and we potentially have a traitor on the inside. For years, we’ve built a reputation of fear and respect around my family’s name, and everyone knows it’s a bad fucking idea to try to cross us.

Whoever this rogue group is, they’ve just asked for war.

And that’s exactly what they’ll get.

GRACE

WHEN BRIAN SMILES AT ME, I know I've made the right choice.

His hand is warm and steady in mine as he puts the ring on my finger, his gaze never leaving mine. In just a few moments, all my nerves are washed away, and as I listen to him recite his vows, happiness and calm fill me.

"You may now kiss the bride," the priest says.

Brian leans down to kiss me, sweetly bringing his lips to my own. He's always been a good kisser, but modest in public. I know that later tonight, I'll get the real bridal kiss, not just this innocent, honey-sweet brush of his lips against mine that melts all of the old women's hearts in the audience.

The guests clap as we pull away, turning to face them. Taking my hand in his own, Brian begins to lead me back down the aisle. My father smiles at me from the front seat, wiping away the blood that covers his face.

Wait.

The blood...

My footsteps slow, my feet dragging against the polished floor as my heart stutters in my chest.

The blood...

I tug my hand from Brian's, looking down at my open palms. My hands and forearms are covered in blood, slick and red with it. It drips onto the floor, each dark droplet landing with the finality of a hammer falling.

Pop!

A bullet pierces my side, and pain explodes through my body.

WAVE AFTER WAVE of a dull pain washes over me as I float somewhere between *awake* and the realm of my dreams, head pounding. My whole body feels like it's been run over by a car, and though my mind is foggy from sleep and pain, I know that everything is wrong.

Deep inside, something doesn't feel right.

I try to roll over, to move—anything to feel some control over my own body—but gravity weighs me down, pressing me into the hard mattress beneath me. My limbs are slick with sweat and my body feverish. My mind is a confused mess.

Why am I so weak? I don't remember being sick.

Groaning, I try to arch my body off the bed, but I barely have the strength to lift a finger.

My eyes feel glued shut as I struggle to open them, needing to see the familiar and comforting walls of my bedroom. The dreams about the wedding have been haunting me for weeks now, but I know it's just nerves. Cold feet, maybe. It'll be fine.

But the survival instinct embedded in my chest pulses out a steady rhythm, the message strong and unchanging.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

This is wrong. Something is wrong.

A rush of adrenaline helps clear some of the pain and grogginess from my system, and I force my eyes open. I'm staring at a blank wall, painted a dull beige color with water stains near the baseboard.

That's not my wall.

This isn't my bed.

At that thought, everything comes rushing back. The church. The gunshots. The blood. My father, dying in front of me.

I surge upright with a choked gasp. Pain instantly floods my body, and a wave of nausea sweeps over me. But I ignore both sensations, crawling toward the edge of the bed and scrambling off of it, looking around wildly

for an exit. The world tilts in my vision, and my knees go weak before I've even taken two steps.

"Not so fast, kitten."

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

I hear the sound of chairs scraping the floor behind me, and I know it's too late, but I still try.

I lurch forward, throwing myself toward the door as though if I can just touch it, just *reach* it, I'll find salvation.

But I should've known better than to even hope.

Zaid and Lucas are quick, far quicker than I could ever be in this state. Within seconds, they're on me. Strong arms wrap around my waist, hauling me back and throwing me onto the bed again. A fresh wave of nausea and pain bursts through me, and panic beats like a drum in my chest. I struggle against their hold as two large bodies pin me to the bed from either side.

Memories come flooding back at the familiar feeling of being trapped between them. Memories of being sixteen and a little tipsy on stolen wine from a party the adults were having downstairs. Of feeling wild and free, wanton and brave. Of wanting something but not wanting to choose.

Zaid and Lucas always share.

That night, the feeling of being pinned between their bodies was the most exquisite thing I'd ever felt. Four hands explored my body, touching me in ways I'd never been touched. New feelings blossomed in my chest—feelings that took my breath away, feelings I wanted to explore and chase. Zaid and Lucas were relentless, determined only to give *me* satisfaction.

It only happened once. Just one night between the three of us right before my mother died and my father and I fled.

But if I had stayed...

My heartbeat feels erratic and unstable, as if the overtaxed organ is about to give out at any moment. I can't seem to catch a full breath. Vivid memories of the past collide with the harsh reality of the present, and my body and mind feel paralyzed, unable to sort out one from the other. Unable to separate what's real and what's just a memory.

Unbidden, a flush of arousal burns through my veins, chased away almost immediately by pain and fear.

These aren't the boys I had one wild night with back when my life still made sense.

They're bigger now.

Harder.

Colder.

Zaid's green eyes burn as his gaze locks on mine, and I have no idea what he's thinking. Is he remembering that night too? Does he ever think of it? Or has he nearly forgotten me in all the years since I left, erasing my memory in the dozens of other women he's probably fucked in the meantime?

The thought sends something hot and fierce burning through my veins, and I jerk my head forward, trying to headbutt him.

He jerks his head to the side at the last moment, just barely avoiding my attempted blow, and all I get for my trouble is a rush of dark stars in my vision and a wave of nausea that makes me gasp for breath, the coppery tang of bile coating my tongue.

I'm panting, grunting, struggling like an animal in a cage, and I don't even know what I hope to achieve. Just that I want to hurt these men. To hurt them like they hurt me.

When I squirm against them, trying to get an elbow up to lash out, Lucas wraps a strong arm around my waist from behind, his muscled forearm pressing against my exposed stomach.

A shock of pain bursts through my side, and when I cry out, he hisses and loosens his grip a little. Between the pain in my head and the pain in my side, I can barely see straight, and the two of them use my moment of weakness to pin me firmly to the bed, stopping me from struggling at all.

"You need to calm down," Zaid says firmly. His voice is deeper than I remembered. Rough and masculine. Less boyish.

"I'm too weak to go anywhere, okay?" I rasp, closing my eyes against the barrage of agony—both physical and mental—that assaults me. "You can let go of me."

"Yeah. Fat fucking chance of that, you wildcat." Lucas chuckles, and the sound vibrates through my body. But there's no real humor in it.

Before I can respond, the door opens. At the sound, I force my unwilling eyelids to open again, blinking at the assault of light. Ciro steps inside the room, barely even glancing at the three of us as he moves to the nightstand and sets down a small box. He flips it open, and the sound of the wooden lid hitting the nightstand makes shivers crawl down my spine.

I don't know what the fuck is in that box, but I'm terrified to find out.

"Am I interrupting something?" Ciro's gaze finally flicks to us, his steel-gray eyes impossible to read, his face impassive. There's something... blank about him that only adds to the fear building inside me.

Zaid and Lucas have filled out and gotten harder-edged since I saw them last. But Ciro has changed completely. Although his features haven't changed all that much in the transition from boyhood to manhood, there's something about him that's almost unrecognizable to me—as if the person he is inside has been altered irrevocably.

"Nope." Lucas releases his hold on me, pulling his body away first. The cool of the air hits my back in his absence, and I shiver in spite of my relief at his absence. "Thought she could be clever and try to escape. With a fucking bullet wound in her side and no idea where the hell she even is."

Zaid lingers a second longer, his gaze catching mine again. At his brother's words, something like pity flashes across his face, but it's there and gone again so fast that I can't convince myself I really saw it. Then he moves away from me and gets off the bed too, straightening his clothes. He's wearing well-fitted jeans and a dark blue long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled up on his forearms. He looks casual but commanding, something I'm sure wasn't an accident.

Ciro gives the twins another look that I can't decipher, so I don't even try. My throat is dry and sore, and as the adrenaline in my veins dies away, an overwhelming tiredness washes over me, the weight of my situation finally settling.

Lucas is right about one thing. I *don't* know where I am or why I've been taken. And just because I once knew the men who've taken me captive, I doubt I'm any more likely to survive this than if I'd been taken by strangers. I saw the way Hale looked at me after he dumped me on the seat of the van.

With pure hatred in his eyes.

Disgust.

Resentment.

Hell, maybe I'd be safer with strangers. There's too much baggage between me and these men, and I can feel it infecting the very air around us.

The mattress shifts as Ciro sits on the bed next to me. I make a move to scramble away, but his hand clamps around my uninjured wrist. His

expression doesn't change one bit, and his grip isn't tight, but his hand seems to engulf my wrist, making me feel tiny. Vulnerable. Breakable.

Without even uttering a single word, he's issued me a warning.

"I need to check your stitches," he says, releasing me once he sees in my expression that I'm not going to move. He leans over and grabs the box he brought in, then pulls out antiseptic and a fresh roll of bandages. "You were shot."

As if summoned by his words, pain flares in my side, along with a vivid memory of the bullet tearing through my skin.

Right. No wonder my whole body fucking hurts.

I lie still and try to control my breathing as Ciro lifts up my shirt and peels the bandages away from my side. His fingers are deft and sure, moving confidently as if he's done this dozens of times before.

He probably has.

"It's going to scar," he notes absently, setting the discarded bandages aside.

"Yeah, I know. I'm not an idiot, Ciro," I whisper. It's meant to be a taunt, but I'm too weak for it to have much bite. And I suppose I should take it as a good sign that he thinks I'll be alive long enough for a scar to form.

The room goes quiet as he works. Zaid and Lucas stand sentry from the foot of the bed, watching with their arms crossed over their chests. They've fallen into almost the exact same pose, something they used to do all the time when we were younger—like they were bookends, mirror images of each other.

I thought it was charming then. Now, it just makes me hate them more.

Ciro doesn't seem bothered by their steady stares. He works quickly, disinfecting the stitches on both the front and back side of my abdomen before reaching into the box and pulling out some large gauze pads.

I can't help but stare at him too. I don't know what the hell to think of him. He's always been the quiet one out of the four men. Only now, his quietness is different. Unnerving. It's almost as if he's empty inside, void of any emotion. His lethal silence terrifies me more than any show of power Zaid or Lucas could ever pull.

In fact, he scares the shit out of me.

“That’s new.” I swallow, then point to the tattoo on his right forearm. I’m not sure why I’m bothering to talk to any of my captors, but the silence is making my skin prickle. “It’s... nice.”

He looks down at his arm as if he’s forgotten the piece of ink is there, gazing at the dark tattoo that’s been added to the full sleeve of ink on his right arm. It’s a black snake, covered in white roses, coiling around his arm. It actually is beautiful, but if it has meaning, I know he’s never going to tell me. As frequently as we used to be in each other’s company, I was never close with *Ciro*. Only close enough for me to know that he’s an extremely private person.

I don’t have time to blurt another pointless comment, because a second later, the door slams open again and *Hale* walks in. A bolt of tension follows him into the room, as if he’s brought a fucking thunderstorm with him.

“What the fuck is going on?” he demands, stalking toward the bed. He stands to one side of where *Ciro* is sitting, towering over me like an avenging god. “Look at me, *Grace*. I want fucking answers. *Now*.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Goose bumps break out over my skin as fear and anger war inside me. *Ciro* finishes with my bandages and slides out of the way, leaving no barrier at all between the furious man glowering down at me.

“You know exactly what I mean, *smartass*,” he says. “Your dad was up to something, wasn’t he? What the hell kind of shit was he into?”

“Nothing!” I scoot away from him on the mattress, but *Zaid* moves to block the other side of the bed, trapping me between the four of them. *Fuck*.

“Really?” *Hale* cocks his head, his dark blue eyes burning. “You were always a daddy’s girl, *Grace*. You really expect me to believe he didn’t tell you *anything*?”

“There’s nothing to tell.” I swallow, my scratchy throat dry as cotton. “He isn’t into anything. He has a good job at a bank. He pays his fucking bills. He’s just a normal guy.”

“Was.”

I blink. “What?”

“You said he *is*, *Grace*.” *Hale*’s voice is hard. “But he’s fucking dead. He isn’t anything anymore. Everything you’re telling me is what he *was*.”

My stomach seems to shrivel in on itself, leaving a hard lump inside me. Tears burn my eyes as the reality of my situation hits me full-force once again. My father is dead. He died in my arms, his blood covering my torso and neck. He's gone. He's *gone*.

It's hard to draw a full breath. Grief and shock are crawling through my limbs like ice, turning me numb.

Hale's jaw clenches, and he shakes his head like his chastising himself for something. Then his expression softens a bit. "It's okay Grace," he says quietly. "You don't need to protect him anymore. You can talk."

I don't need to protect him.

Because he's dead.

"I told you, I don't know anything!" I spit the words like venom, almost snarling at him. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you shit, you *fucking* asshole!"

"What was your dad up to?" Hale's voice is still soft, but I can't find it comforting. The calm in his voice is lethal—he's a ticking time bomb, and I'm the target.

"If he was up to anything, he didn't tell me!" My hands claw at the sheets, trying to ease some of the tension in my body. "We were living a normal life until you decided to show up at my fucking wedding!"

A fresh wave of pain hits me as the words tear from my throat. Not physical pain from my wounds, but the pain of regret. Of hopelessness. Of the enormity of what they took from me.

They just took away the life I worked so hard to build—the one that may never have made me deliriously happy, but that never made me feel agony like this.

And for what? For revenge?

Didn't they get enough of that when my father's blood bathed the church floor? What more can they possibly want?

They could take whatever vengeance they still think they're owed out on you, a small voice in my head whispers, making a shiver run down my spine.

I don't want to believe that, don't want to consider the possibility. But they have me captive. I'm completely at their mercy.

They can do whatever they want to me.

“If my dad was doing anything, he didn’t tell me.” I repeat the words, my voice dull and subdued. Exhaustion is blackening the edges of my vision again, and I don’t have the strength to keep screaming at Hale. “Maybe he was into something shady and never told me, but I never suspected it. I never knew about it. When I say we were living a normal life, I mean we were living a normal life.” I huff a breath that’s almost a laugh. “Not that any of you would know what that is.”

Silence settles for a long moment as Hale and the other men absorb my words. I hope like hell they can hear the truth in them, because if they keep pushing for a different answer, I don’t know what I’ll do. I have no more information to give them.

“What about the other men?” Hale asks, shifting his line of questioning. I don’t know if that means he believes me about my dad, or if he’s just letting the subject drop for now. “The other group who showed up. Do you know who they are?”

“What other men?” I blink at him, my brows pulling together.

“The other men who attacked in the church.” He narrows his eyes at me, as if he thinks I’m trying to pull a fast one on him. “We weren’t shooting our own guys.”

Thinking for a moment, I try to recall the other men in the church. Even if I did know any of them, it’s not like I would remember now. The whole terrifying event can’t have lasted more than five minutes, but time seemed to both slow and speed up, leaving me with a spotty recollection of the details. It all passed by in a blur; I barely had enough time to register that I was being taken, let alone to identify the individual faces of a dozen gunmen.

“No...” I shake my head slowly. “I’d never seen any of them before.”

“Could there have been anyone at the wedding who knew about your past life?” Hale’s questions are relentless.

“Besides my father... no.”

“Not even your fiancé?”

“No.”

Hale stares at me hard. My skin prickles, but I hold his gaze, refusing to look away. He can either think I’m lying or that I had a terrible relationship with my husband-to-be—one based on secrets and massive omissions. I

don't care which conclusion he draws. It's none of his goddamn business what I did or didn't tell my fiancé.

"Was there anyone you invited who would have been able to find out about your life?" He leans closer, slowing his words as if the reason he's not getting the answers he wants is because I'm too stupid to understand.

Irritation begins to crawl over me. I just want him to leave me the fuck alone. I want to let the exhaustion that's pulling at me drag me away from consciousness for a while, to float in blissful oblivion and pretend none of this is real. "No. None of them knew anything. We never talked about it. Ever. It was my father's only unbreakable rule."

Hale's jaw clenches, his eyes bouncing between mine. Then he curses and straightens, stepping back from the bed. "Fucking hell. All right, we're done here."

My heart doesn't even jump with hope. Whatever Hale might think, I'm not stupid. I know "we're done here" doesn't mean they're going to let me go. It doesn't even mean they're done interrogating me for answers. It means I get a momentary reprieve, nothing more.

"Zaid." He jerks his chin toward his two friends. "Rope."

The man with copper-blond hair nods, then crosses over to one corner of the room and unzips a large black duffel bag. When he strides back toward us with several lengths of rope dangling from his grip, my body jerks. I scoot backward on the mattress, but Lucas stops me before I can slide off.

Zaid tosses the ropes to Hale, who catches them without turning around. Then Hale kneels on the bed on one knee and grabs my ankle, pulling me toward him. He grips my wrist and pins it above me, pressing it to the cool metal above my head.

His hands make quick work with the ropes and the headboard, his body leaning over mine as he binds one of my wrists. His clean, masculine scent trickles into my nostrils, and my eyes flare wide.

"What the hell are you doing?" I rasp.

"Tying you up to the bed." He yanks the knot tighter. "So you don't escape."

My heart races. "I'm not gonna try to escape."

"You're such a fucking liar."

Crossing over my body, he grabs the other wrist, tying it just as tight as the first. I ignore the weight of him pressing into me, the closeness of his chest to my face, as I yank against the bonds that hold me. But they're unforgiving and unbreakable. I'm not going to move unless someone lets me out.

My breath quickens. I don't like being out of control.

"I can't move anyway," I say desperately, and edge of panic bleeding into my voice. "I'm in too much fucking pain. I'm too weak."

His cobalt eyes flicker as he glances down at me, his gaze skating over my side where the bullet wound is. I'm no longer wearing my wedding dress. I'm in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and I refuse to even let myself think about who changed my clothes.

"Yeah, well." Hale meets my gaze again. "Ciro's a good medic. You'll heal up quick. And besides, I know you, Grace. You're a fucking fighter. *Too weak* isn't in your vocabulary."

It's not a compliment. Or at least, I don't take it as one. How can I, when his words feel like the final nail in my coffin?

For some reason, I find myself looking to *Ciro* for help. He knows exactly what condition my body is in—he's the one who stitched me up. I'm not going to be able to escape, even without being tied up, and he should know that.

Never mind that Hale is right. Even if I had to crawl on my knees through broken glass, I'd try anyway.

Maybe *Ciro* knows it too. Because he doesn't speak up or lift a finger to stop his friend as Hale gives the knots on my wrists one final tug.

"Zaid, you're on watch."

That's the last thing Hale says before they all leave the room.

GRACE

PART of me expects to pass out again as soon as they leave the room. My head is still fuzzy, my body aching—although I’m pretty sure *Ciro* must’ve given me some painkillers, because my gunshot wound doesn’t hurt nearly as much as it should.

But once I’m alone, sleep refuses to come. Blissful unconsciousness hovers just out of reach.

So I stare at the ceiling instead, my gaze tracing the shapes in the spackling. I’ve been through a roller coaster of emotions already—denial, panic, fear, anger. Now I’m somewhere between calm and *I-should-actually-be-freaking-out*.

I’m numb.

I tried my luck with the ropes, but *Hale* wasn’t fucking around when he tied them—they’re not coming undone unless *he* decides to release me. I don’t know how much time has passed since they left me alone in this room. There’s only one window in the room, and it’s dark outside, so I assume it’s night. But without a clock, time doesn’t seem to exist in here.

How many hours ago was I about to walk down the aisle? About to say my vows and start a new chapter of my life?

Has it even been twenty-four?

Maybe. But probably not.

It’s been less than a day since these four men took my life and flipped it upside down, sending everything I loved crashing to the floor.

Deep down, I always wondered if they would come for us. I wanted to ask Dad about it more than once, but that would've violated his "pretend the past doesn't exist" rule, so I never did. I knew he wouldn't answer me anyway.

I don't understand. Why did this happen?

I fight back tears. All I want right now is to not be here. I want to go home and take a shower and find Brian in bed, cuddle up next to him and fall asleep.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and remind myself to *stay here*. I can't let myself slip away or drift into pointless fantasies. It's not good for my morale. I have to stay alert and on guard—a moment to escape could present itself at any moment, and I'd be a fool if I let it slip by because I wasn't paying attention.

Fuck. Why did it have to be them?

I think about the four men I never thought I would see again—men whose younger selves were such a huge part of my past. Growing up, I could always count on Zaid and Lucas to have my back, and even Hale. Ciro's protection stayed mostly behind the scenes, but whenever he was absent, I felt it in a lonely sort of way.

Why couldn't it have been the other group who took me? People I could have had more reason to hate, to despise?

No. I'm lucky.

No matter how much I hate that it had to be Hale and his crew, I'm lucky it's them. Because no matter how much Hale hates me—and the others too, probably—we all have history with each other. We were friends once. That has to count for something.

Doesn't it?

But they liked my father once too, and that didn't stop several bullets from ending his life today. I don't know whether the bullets came from one of these men's guns or from the other group of attackers, but it doesn't really matter. I don't doubt that if Hale had the chance, he would've put a bullet between Dad's eyes.

Dad.

My heart cracks at the memory of his face, of him slicking back his hair at the church. A small part of me feels like I'm already betraying him. He's dead, and I don't even know where he is, whether his body has been

identified. If funeral arrangements are being made. The police have probably already swarmed and swept the church, knowing that I'm missing and suspecting criminal activity. At this point, I don't know if one of the groups took his body as ransom or simply a souvenir, or if he's being held in some cold morgue.

Was my dad up to something?

The thought never crossed my mind until today. I was sure my father had put that life behind him for good. That he was done with it.

Nothing makes sense right now, and I'm not going to try to figure it out. Because what I do know for certain is that my focus needs to be on finding an escape. Where to, I'm not sure, but I can't think long term right now. I simply need to find a way out of *this* place, away from these dangerous, fucked up men.

A thought forms in my mind as I glance to the closed door, wondering if Zaid is still sitting guard like the dutiful little watchdog he is.

He's just one man. I have better odds against him than against all four of them.

Especially if I can get him to let his guard down.

"Zaid..." I call out, my voice hoarse.

I'm met with only silence. The door doesn't open, and I hear no footsteps in the hall. I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do if I actually get him in here, but I have to try.

"Zaid?"

I think I hear a shuffle outside of the room, and sure enough, the door clicks open a second later. I do my best to shift my mindset, to remind myself of the way I used to think of this man—to see him as that person instead of as a dangerous enemy. I have to, if I'm going to pull off the role I need to play.

My pulse races when his green gaze settles on my prone body. Unconsciously, I strain my wrists against the ties.

I swallow, forcing the words past my throat and trying to sound as pitiful as possible. It doesn't take much effort. "I... I have to go to the bathroom."

"Looks like you'll have to piss on the bed, kitten."

He turns on his heels to leave, and panic surges inside me. I can't let him walk through that door. If he leaves the room, my chance to escape

goes with him. I have to keep him here. I have to convince him to untie these fucking ropes.

“Zaid.”

He pauses. Turns around. *Good*. I need to keep him here. Keep him interested.

“Don’t leave.” My voice is husky. It takes all my willpower to force myself to make the request, as if the words are dragged up from the depths of my soul.

“Why not?”

“I don’t... I don’t want to be alone.” The words come easier this time. They’re true, in a way. I *don’t* want to be alone. My spiraling thoughts are terrifying, and the longer I’m left on my own with them, the deeper panic takes root.

Something flits across Zaid’s expression. I can’t quite tell what it is, but he takes another step closer to the bed, crossing his arms over his chest. “What do you want, Grace? A bedtime story?”

I can see him hardening himself against me, resisting the pull of the history between us. Pretending I’m a stranger, someone he doesn’t know at all. I did the same thing with the four of them, distancing myself as a means of self-preservation. But right now, I need to break down those walls.

“What happened to you all?” I ask softly, letting out the question that’s been hovering in my mind ever since I recognized who they were in the van. “You’ve changed so much. What happened?”

He snorts, his lips turning up in a humorless smile. “*Life* happened, kitten. That’s all.”

“Not everybody’s life changes them like this.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Has yours?”

“I...” I swallow. I don’t want to tell him anything about myself or what the past six years have been like. But I’ve got him talking. His posture has relaxed a little. And I know if I don’t give him anything, this conversation will end quickly. He’ll turn on his heel and walk right back out the door.

“Yes. Not like yours changed you, but... yes. Since we left Chicago, everything has been different. I left behind everything I knew, the world I was used to. The people I cared about.”

Zaid’s green eyes seem to darken, and he tugs his lower lip between his teeth. “What? You mean you didn’t love your life as the perfect little

Stepford wife?”

Irritation flares inside me, but I push it down. “I wasn’t a Stepford wife. I wasn’t even married yet.”

He makes a noise in his throat, taking another step forward and sitting on the edge of the bed, his gaze still locked on mine. “To that fuckin’ cop.”

“Yes.” I don’t try to deny it. Of course they know what Brian does for a living.

He shakes his head. “Grace Weston, married to a cop. Never thought I’d see that day.”

“We aren’t married yet.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that.”

Something in his voice makes a prickle of awareness move over my skin. Or maybe it’s the way he hasn’t stopped looking at me since he came into the room. Like he’s gone six years without the sight of me, and now that I’m in front of him again, his greedy eyes are trying to make up for lost time.

He’s looking at me like he never wants to look away.

That thought makes my stomach flip over, and my heart thuds a little harder as I shift on the mattress, tugging lightly at the binds on my wrists. “Zaid? I really do need to pee.”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Sorry, kitten. We’ll give you a chance to take care of business in a bit. But Hale’s orders are to keep you tied up.”

“Do you do everything he tells you to?”

Zaid’s eyes snap up. Whatever softness I saw in them a moment ago, it’s gone, and I curse my big fucking mouth and my quick tongue for ruining whatever rapport we were developing.

“Yeah. I do. Because he’s the son of Damian Novak, the head of our syndicate, and he’s my fucking commander. Or did you forget how shit works in the mafia?”

“I’m sorry.” I bite my lip, looking away. “I didn’t mean to insult you. It’s just that the boy I knew back then was... kinder.” I let my gaze slide back to his, let myself look into his vibrant green eyes. Eyes I was once so entranced by. “That Zaid wouldn’t have taken pleasure in hurting me.”

“You think I take pleasure in this?” He leans back a little, looking around the room. “I fucking don’t. But that’s not the point.” He blows out

another breath. “And I don’t want to hurt you, Grace.”

My heart cracks at the honesty I hear in his voice, but I remind myself it doesn’t matter. He could just be a good fucking liar, and even if he’s telling the truth, it doesn’t change the facts. And the fact is he will hurt me if he has to, whether he enjoys it or not.

But I don’t say any of that. Instead, I just dip my head in a small nod. “I understand.”

He snorts. “Nah, I’m sure you don’t. I don’t even understand this fucking mess right now, so I don’t see how you could.”

He rises from the bed, but then he hesitates, his gaze flicking up to my wrists where they’re bound to the headboard. Hale tied the ropes tight, and I can feel the binds squeezing against my flesh. I’m sure my wrists are raw and chafed.

“Does that hurt?” Zaid asks suddenly.

I nod, my heart leaping in my chest.

“Fuck,” he mutters. Then he shakes his head, like he’s answering a question he asked himself. “Well, I can at least make sure it’s not cutting off your damn circulation.”

He kneels on the mattress like Hale did earlier, reaching over me to check the ropes binding my wrists. He tugs on them a little, not loosening the knots but adjusting the way they lie so that they don’t pinch as badly. I hold perfectly still, hardly even daring to breathe as he works.

This could be my chance. If he just shifts the ropes a little more, maybe I can squeeze my hands out of the bindings.

I try to focus, to be ready to run or fight if I have to. But I’m distracted, consumed by the sheer *presence* of him. His fingertips brush over the skin of my wrist, an accidental touch that sends shivers into my palm and down my arm.

Maybe he can see me shudder. Or maybe he can feel it. Because he stops moving suddenly as his eyes drag back to mine.

His gaze lingers, hands above us at the ties. For a moment, everything seems to stop, as if the entire world is holding its breath.

“You smell like I remember,” I whisper.

And it’s true. He does. The same alluring scent of vanilla and musk.

His nostrils flare, his pupils expanding until they nearly overtake his irises. I wonder for a brief moment if I smell like he remembers. If his

memory plays tricks on him every time he breathes me in, just like mine does.

But I never get a chance to ask.

Because a half-second later, Zaid drops his head, crushing his lips against mine.

My entire body jerks in reaction, shock shooting through me like a lightning bolt. His lips are firm and warm, hungry and demanding. A groan rumbles through his chest and into my mouth as he deepens the kiss, and he shifts his body on the bed until he's half on top of me.

A jab of pain flares in the wound in my side, but it's not strong enough to steal my attention.

All I'm aware of is Zaid.

All I can feel is Zaid.

I'm drunk on the taste, touch, and feel of *Zaid* on top of me, body pressing into me, lips devouring my mouth and jawline and neck and ears. I've kissed him before, but although there's an echo of that previous kiss in this one, it's foreign and unfamiliar too. He's all man now. There's no trace of the boy he used to be left in his touch.

He's dominance and possession, hunger and wrath.

As he shifts his hips against mine, I feel the length of him, already hard against my lower belly. It makes a pulse of arousal throb deep between my legs, rising up above my pain and shock and confusion. A moan spills from me against my will, and he shifts again, grinding against me.

"You like that, kitten?" His voice is a ragged rasp, like he's been drugged by whatever poison has infected me. Like he's as out of control as I am.

I want to wrap my arms around him and pull him closer, but I'm caught against the binds above my head, held fast in his control. I wonder if he's going to use it as some power play, but instead, he reaches above us, his lips still consuming every inch of me they can reach, his breath hot against my skin. He gropes blindly for the ropes, and I can feel his frustration building as he struggles to undo them faster. His hips grind harder against mine as he finally unties first one wrist and then the other.

My arms fall free, and he groans, burying his face in my neck and sucking on the tender skin there.

Sparks dance before my eyes, and I feel like I might pass out again—like I might succumb to darkness just like I did in the van when I was bleeding out on the seat.

It's too much.

Too fucking overwhelming.

Rationally, I know this is my moment to escape, but my body has other plans—my arms wrap around his shoulders, broadened by the years, pulling his body flush up against mine. Another stab of pain radiates through my side, but it only makes the feelings churning inside me spiral higher, making every nerve ending in my body sing.

I feel like I'm outside of myself, like whatever rational mind I have left is observing all of this from the outside.

Whatever is in charge of my body right now is anything but rational. It's pure animal instinct, the basest of human desires.

The need to *feel*. To beat back pain with pleasure.

I tilt my head up, letting Zaid kiss and lick his way up my neck and throat.

It's not enough, so I wrap my legs around him, rolling my hips against his hardness. My breasts strain against the thin shirt I'm wearing, my nipples going taut. I want the full weight of his toned chest against mine, his hands on my breasts, his mouth on my skin. I don't care if it pulls my stitches. In fact, a reckless part of me hopes it does. Hopes I bleed out in Zaid's arms, my life flaring like a spark before winking out.

His tongue swirls against the column of my throat, dipping lower as his teeth scrape my collarbone. I grip his head, pressing him into me, weaving my hands through his soft hair as an inarticulate groan falls from my lips. My clit pulses with every suck and nip of his tongue and teeth, jealous of his attention.

His chuckle reverberates through my entire body as he palms my breast, letting his thumb roll in delicate circles across my peaked nipple. My panties are already soaked. I can feel them sticking to my skin, wet with my arousal.

No. This is so fucking wrong. I need to... escape.

But there's never been a simple escape from Zaid's touch. He was an addiction when I was sixteen, and now I'm like a druggie falling off the wagon—tossing away six years of sobriety for a momentary high.

Nothing that's happened in the past twenty-four hours has made sense. It all feels like a fucked up dream.

And this is no different.

Zaid grunts against my skin as he reaches for the zipper of my borrowed jeans, yanking it down and rubbing against my wet panties before slipping a hand all the way down to the heat of my core.

Madness tears through me. Pure insanity.

I buck against his touch, and when he pulls his hand out of my pants to slide his own zipper down, I make no move to stop him. He braces himself on one arm above me, staring down at me with eyes that look almost black. Devilish.

My chest is rising and falling fast, my nipples hard buds beneath the fabric of my shirt, and when his gaze moves down my body, he groans.

“Oh, Jesus...”

He drops his head, his lips claiming mine again as his tongue slides into my mouth with demanding strokes—

“What the fuck?”

The furious shout tears through the almost dream-state I've ended up in, and my heart freezes in my chest before taking off like a panicked rabbit. I wrench my mouth away from Zaid's as we both turn our heads.

The door slams shut behind Hale as he storms into the room.

My blood turns to water, and I can feel the color draining from my cheeks.

The look on his face is pure fury.

GRACE

“WHAT IN THE actual *fuck* is going on in here?”

The words are barely out of Hale’s mouth before he grabs Zaid by the shoulder, throwing him off the bed. The blond man lands hard on the floor with a grunt, and Hale rounds on him. He doesn’t even seem to have noticed that my wrists have been untied—or if he has, he doesn’t care.

Relief and terror clash inside me as I watch Zaid scramble to his feet.

What the fuck did I just do? What would I have done if we weren’t interrupted?

Things were never supposed to go that far. I had hoped to remind Zaid of the friendship we used to have, of the feelings that once existed between us—but *those* weren’t the feelings I was trying to reignite.

The craving.

The addiction.

The desire.

I didn’t think I would let things get that far, but as soon as they started, I didn’t know how to stop him. I could’ve tried to push him away and make a run for it the second my hands were untied. So why didn’t I? Is it because he was too strong, his bodyweight too solid as he pressed me into the mattress?

Or is it because in that insane, fucked-up moment, I didn’t want to?

Because for one wild second, I would’ve traded my life and freedom just to feel Zaid inside me again?

You’re fucked in the head, Grace.

There's a *crunch* as Hale's fist meets Zaid's face without warning, vicious and brutal. Zaid's body absorbs the impact, and he stumbles to the side of the room, rocking the dresser that's set against one wall and leaving dents in the plaster behind it. Before he has time to recover, Hale rushes at him full-force, hitting him again, blood from his fists splattering their shirts.

Oh my God.

My heart pounds as I watch the fight in horror. Hale gets in another hard punch, and Zaid grunts.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Hale shouts, rage burning in every syllable. "Don't you know who she is?" His fist swings again. "She's the daughter of our goddamn enemy. That makes her our enemy too. Did you forget that? Did it slip your fucking mind?"

There's a *crash* as Zaid's body falls to the floor, at last giving up. He put up as much fight as he could to keep his dignity, but ultimately, Hale is his leader.

"You can't be distracted by her. We can't fucking trust her." Hale stands over his friend, his hands still clenched into fists, blood smearing his knuckles. It smears Zaid's face too, leaking from his nostrils and from a small cut near his eye.

My heart is thudding painfully hard, but as Hale stares down at Zaid, my gaze darts to the door.

This is my last chance to escape, I realize. The two men are distracted by their standoff, and I'm still untied. Maybe my attempt doesn't have to be worthless after all.

As quickly and silently as I can, I scramble toward the end of the bed. My bare feet touch the floor, and I'm already sprinting toward the door. But before I can reach it, Hale's focus snaps back to me, and he moves like lightning.

He slams the door shut again before I even open it an inch, and then I'm hauled off my feet and carried back to the bed, where he throws me down on the mattress.

The heavy landing on the hard, old mattress jars my fresh wounds, and I cry out in pain.

But any pity Hale might've once had for me has evaporated, burned away by the fury that still consumes him. Unrelenting, he pins me to the bed with his weight, reaching for the ropes that rest near the headboard.

Then his hands freeze in mid-motion. His eyes narrow.

Slowly, he pulls his body from off mine and looks down at my unzipped pants, then back at Zaid.

Shit. He didn't notice that before.

Which means if Hale was pissed before, it's nothing compared to the look that now takes over his face—his features contorting in anger and deadly rage. Fear washes through me as my breath stutters, my lungs unable to draw in enough oxygen. I don't know what he's thinking or what he's planning to do, but the way his body has gone unnaturally still makes me feel like I'm staring at a predator about to strike.

His fingers settle at my navel as he watches Zaid, drumming a pattern into my skin. My body is already crawling with arousal from earlier, and my stomach clenches under his touch, my skin flushing with heat.

"So you really were... fucking with the enemy, weren't you, Zaid?" Hale's voice is calm. Too calm. Zaid shakes his head, pressing his lips together as if refusing to answer. His pants are half-unzipped too, hanging off his hips slightly.

Hale makes a noise in his throat, watching me in silent contemplation.

I close my eyes and swallow, trying to bite back the panic in my bones.

Put up a fight, Grace. Die fighting.

I need to be screaming and kicking and fighting my way from him, at least distracting him from whatever is on his mind, but I can't. My body is frozen under the tips of his fingers as if they each weigh a thousand pounds.

"I thought you knew better." Hale speaks to Zaid, but he never takes his gaze off me. "We can't let the past blind us. We can't let her fool us. She'll lie, and she'll use whatever we *think* existed before to manipulate us. Can't you see that?"

Zaid still doesn't respond, but Hale doesn't seem like he expects an answer. His dark blue eyes burn with an inner fire as he drags his fingers down the flat plane of my stomach, then slides them beneath the waistband of my panties. One thick finger slides through my folds, and my breath hitches in my throat.

"You're wet," Hale murmurs, and now he *is* speaking to me. His voice is low and rough, but still devoid of emotion. "Is that a lie too?"

My chest rises and falls faster and faster as his finger drags slowly upward, and when it brushes against my sensitive clit, I bite my lip against

the noise that tries to escape my mouth. Behind Hale, Zaid groans, the sound quiet and tortured.

“I think it is.” Hale’s finger circles my clit again, his face impassive as he watches me. “I think it’s all a lie.”

He dips between my folds to gather more of the sticky arousal there, using two fingers this time as he traces a slow, deliberate pattern over my clit. My toes clench, and I lock my jaw tight, trying to slow my racing heart and the flush of arousal radiating from my core, infecting my whole body.

Why does it feel so good?

How can any of this feel good?

The feel of Hale’s fingers methodically working my clit, combined with the two sets of eyes watching me, makes me feel like my skin is on fire. Like my whole body might go up in flames soon if I don’t find some way to extinguish this spark.

Hale’s dark blue irises look nearly as black as his pupils as he pinches my clit gently between his fingers, making my stomach clench. Given the rage that poured out of him a moment ago, I would’ve expected his touch to be rough and harsh. But it’s not. It’s restrained, controlled.

And that’s worse.

Because instead of forcing the pleasure on my body, overwhelming me and overpowering me with it, he’s making me *chase* it.

Against my will, my hips shift a little, trying to get more friction right where I need it, and a gleam of triumph flares in Hale’s eyes. He’s trying to make a point. To prove something to Zaid or me, or maybe to himself.

I hate the smug confidence on his face, hate that he knows exactly what he’s doing to me, how badly I need to fucking come. My body has been through hell in the past several hours, and now he’s offering it a taste of pleasure.

A taste of bliss.

And even if I don’t want it, the animal in me is determined to claim it.

As another shock of sensation shoots through my body, I tear my gaze away from Hale—and my focus lands on Zaid instead.

He’s standing several feet away, his entire body taut as a wire. His green eyes are hooded with desire, and the moment our eyes lock, a rush of something unfamiliar floods my body. It’s like our souls are connected through our gazes somehow, like I can *feel* everything this is doing to him.

I know he notices every small jerk and twitch of my body as I try to fight down the pleasure rising inside me beneath Hale's demanding fingers, and I can see his muscles tense in response. As if it's taking every last shred of self-control he has not to stride across the room, rip Hale away from me, and bury his face between my legs.

Friendship be damned.

Syndicate be damned.

Orders be damned.

Hale hums low in his throat, a deep vibration that seems to fill my entire body. My hips are moving faster now, my body undulating and my heels digging into the bed, my hands fisting the mattress like I need something to ground me in this storm of sensation.

I can't look away from Zaid. Not even when the pleasure I've been fighting so hard to resist finally crests, rising up inside me like a tidal wave.

He sees everything. I know he does.

He sees my mouth fall open, sees the look of raw ecstasy that sweeps my features, the way my body shudders and quakes under Hale's touch. He sees me shamelessly ride his friend's hand, so lost in the need of the moment that I can't remember what any of this means anymore.

Only that I need this.

"Fuck. Oh, fuck."

Zaid's voice is a choked grunt, and as another wave of pleasure makes my body clench again, he shoves his hand into his boxers and grabs his cock, jerking his fist in rough, harsh movements as his lips curl in a grimace.

It doesn't take more than five strokes before he's done, his shoulders hunching slightly and hips thrusting into his own touch as he comes in his hand.

A few more small aftershocks move through me as Hale's fingers finally slow, the rough pads of his fingertips slick with new wetness.

They're wet from me. From my arousal.

And no matter what he says, that's not a lie.

I swallow, my throat tight and scratchy. My heart thuds viciously against my sternum like it's demanding to be released from my traitorous body.

I can't blame it.

Hale pulls his hand from my dampened panties and stands up from the bed, his face grim. Outwardly, his rage seems to have calmed, but his eyes tell a different story—confusion and panic lace those dark blue irises, a storm of emotions I can't even begin to sort through.

My eyes flicker down to the strain at his pants, and a shiver wracks my body.

His cock may be hidden behind the dark fabric, but I can tell he's hard as steel. And that he's fucking huge.

I snap my gaze back up to the wall behind him, my jaw clenching as my cheeks burn. He drew sensations out of my body that I don't want to admit to, that I refuse to acknowledge. My core is still throbbing with the leftover effects of the orgasm, but I try to ignore it.

Staring at the blank wall, I let the background blur into nothingness. The mattress shifts as Hale moves, reaching for my hands and tying them back up before roughly hiking my pants up and tugging my zipper and button closed. I don't look at him, don't acknowledge his touch in any way.

"Get out, Zaid." Hale breaks the silence.

Zaid passes briefly through my field of vision as he stalks toward the door, tucking himself away and zipping up his own pants. The zipper gives an angry hiss, the sound punctuated by the heavy thud of the door slamming shut behind him.

Leaving just Hale and me in the room.

My gaze remains resolutely on the far wall until Hale's strong fingers wrap around my jaw in a tight grip, turning my head toward him. I can smell myself on him, smell my arousal on his fingers, and it makes liquid heat pool inside me even as my stomach churns.

I have nowhere else to look, so I focus on his face, not letting go of his stare. I refuse to flinch. His fingers tighten on my jaw, the only sign of a reaction from him.

What are you thinking, Hale?

He watches me for a second longer with an inscrutable expression, and I'm not sure if he's going to come back for more or offer a second punishment. His eyelids flicker, and a muscle in his jaw ripples.

"Don't fuck with me, Grace."

With those words, he finally releases his hold on me and strides out the door behind Zaid.

In a second, the space he filled is empty and the room is quiet again.
Who did he just punish most? I let out a shuddery breath. *Me? Zaid?*
Or was it Hale himself?

CIRO

WHEN I PUNCH the guy in the throat, I don't even feel the impact of my fist against his bones. I'm in control of my body, but I don't see or hear anything. I shut down part of my mind when I do this—going through the motions, pushing the memories aside.

After I spent nearly four months as the prisoner of a rival syndicate, blocking out every bit of pain and pushing aside what I knew to protect my family, it comes as second nature to find this familiar place of oblivion.

It's been over a year since Hale and the others freed me from that captivity, but the memories still haunt me daily like ghosts that trail in my shadows.

Beasts that sit on my shoulders.

Maybe it's for the best that I've learned how to turn my emotions off completely. To shut them down.

It makes this easier.

"Who do you work for?" I ask the man again, lowering my tone.

I don't believe in yelling or getting in someone's face. This man will break eventually, and I'm not going to physically strain myself to make it happen sooner. When you break someone, you can't break yourself in the process, so I stay in a calm headspace, mentally detaching myself from each of the blows I rain down on him.

The man falls to the floor, and I take the opportunity to kick him—breaking a few ribs while I'm at it. He curls in on himself but keeps his

gaze fixed on me as if daring me to hit him again. Blood drips from his mouth as he looks up and smiles—

I kick him in the temple. Hard.

I may not believe in yelling, but a fucker isn't going to get away with being a smartass in my interrogation cell.

"How much are you going to take, you son of a bitch?" I mutter, watching his eyes roll back.

He's only going to be able to hold on for a little longer at this rate. I patched him up like Hale asked me to, but his stitches are torn, blood seeping quickly from the wound. The gunshot he sustained at the church is going to kill him if we don't do it first.

"How do you know Grace Weston? What did you want with Samuel Weston?"

"Not... talking."

Stupid bastard.

I get down on one knee and take his chin in my hands, forcing him to face me. He still tries to look away, his eyes straining in their sockets as he struggles to look anywhere but at me. To pull himself into a place where he can forget the pain and who he is so that he can protect the secrets he knows.

It's a tactic I'm intimately familiar with.

And unfortunately, he's better at it than I hoped he would be. This guy is good. Well-trained.

"I'm going to break you," I tell him calmly. There's no threat in my voice, just simple truth. "But it's up to you how much breaking I do. You can talk, and we'll help you, or we can force you to talk and then kill you."

"You'll kill me either way," the man heaves, spitting blood.

I nod. "You're right. We will."

His screams echo off the basement walls as I do everything I can to extract information from him. And just like I promised, I do break him.

But his body fails before his mind does.

With one final blow to the head, I knock him out, and can tell in a second that it's over. His body is done fighting, pushed beyond its limits. He's lost too much blood and sustained too much internal damage.

I stand up and brush my pants off, taking a deep breath. Pushing open the interrogation room door, I draw in a deep breath of air that doesn't stink

of sweat and blood and fear. I'll have to take care of the body soon, but I need a minute first.

The safe house is mafia owned, one of many we own scattered across the States. As the Novak Syndicate has extended its reach, they've become necessary. They all look like normal houses, but they're in rural, out-of-the-way areas, and they've all got deep basements and thick walls. Everything we need for our purposes.

In the kitchen, I turn on the sink and begin rinsing my hands, watching the blood that coats them drip into the sink and turn pink as it mixes with the water and swirls down the drain.

I breathe in through my nose, mentally storing away this interrogation in a place I'll never have to revisit it again.

I've gotten good at suppressing memories, but the one I'll never forget is the feeling of wanting to wash everything away, to be clean again. After months of torture, being pushed far beyond human limits—I didn't want food, I didn't want water.

I wanted to feel *clean*.

The funny thing is, I can't even remember what it was like taking that first shower, having those first normal moments of being back. The early months all blend into each other, a gray swirl of darkness in my mind.

The kitchen door swings open, and I catch Hale's reflection in the darkened window above the sink. My best friend knows more about what I went through in captivity than anyone else, but even he doesn't know all of it. There are things no one will ever know.

He respects me enough not to coddle me though, and to allow me to do my job. I'm one of the best interrogators in the Novak Syndicate.

I've learned a lot about torture in my life.

"You want a drink?" Hale offers. He's got a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

I turn off the sink, looking out the window. We're in the middle of fucking nowhere; mountains tower over the house on the west side, capped with snow. It's still early in the evening, but it's completely dark, the full moon not yet fully risen behind the mountains.

Grace...

Hale is standing close enough to me that I catch her scent. I frown, confused. When I turn to look at him, nothing about him appears different,

but he...

Hale smells like Grace.

It's an intoxicating scent, even when it's dulled on his skin—jasmine and sandalwood, something exotic. Something her. It seeped into my nostrils, implanted in my brain while I was stitching her up. A smell you could become a slave for.

Why does he smell like Grace?

My eyes narrow as I watch him take a drink, a knot forming in my chest. I'm not sure if I want to know why he smells like our prisoner or how that came to be, but I don't like it.

"You all right?" Hale raises an eyebrow, cocking his head at me. "Ciro?"

"Yeah... I'm fine." I take the bottle from his hand and down a quick shot. The warmth of the drink steadies me, but I'm careful to set it aside. There was a time when drinking was an escape for me, after everything happened. I won't go down that road again either. "The guy didn't last long. Couldn't get much from him."

"How long are you going to wait to give him a second round?"

"Can't." I grimace, handing the bottle back to him. "After the injuries he sustained at the church, there wasn't much left in him. I patched him up as best I could, but he didn't last all that long. Didn't talk to save his life either. Whoever he was, he was well trained in keeping his mouth shut."

Hale makes a noise in his throat. "They were all well trained. At the church—that wasn't just a group of bounty hunters or deadbeats thrown together for show. They were well armed, their positions well placed. That attack was planned, just like ours was."

I had been thinking the same thing, and I know Zaid and Lucas have too.

"I'm sorry for not being able to break him sooner." I shake my head, guilt rising up in me. I take my fucking job seriously, and I know I did everything I could to break the guy. But still...

"Not your fault, Ciro." Hale holds up a hand, cutting off my self-recriminating train of thought before it can even get going. "I trust you. I know you did your best. We'll figure it out another way. There are more where he came from, and not everyone in that church went down in the

gunfire. Next time, we'll get someone who's not already a walking dead man."

There's a beat of silence, and I nod at my friend—the only person who's never looked at me differently or treated me differently after my months of being held prisoner. He treats me how he always has, but he also knows when to push me to talk and when silence is what I need. Zaid and Lucas have slowly been able to figure me out again, but Hale is the only person who didn't seem to have to re-learn how to interact with me.

But my mind still spins. *Why do you smell like Grace?*

"Well, I've got to go finish things up." I push away from the counter.

By that, I mean *I have a body to dispose of.*

Leaving Hale in the kitchen, I make my way back down the stairs and into the interrogation room. Ignoring the heavy, unpleasant scents that linger in the air, I lean down and go through the man's pockets.

I find a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, but that's it. No identification or markings that could tell us more about where he's from or who he works for. When I strip his body of his suit and check his tattoos, it's the same story—nothing special to tell us who he belongs to. I toss his personal belongings aside and wrap him up in a sheet, slinging him over my shoulder.

I don't walk far into the darkness to dispose of him—just far enough away from the house that it isn't offensive. The cold and animals will eat away his flesh in only a few days, bones buried under layers of melted snow and ice. We're too far away from civilization for any hiker or local to find him, and we won't be staying here long anyway.

Besides, I doubt he'll be reported missing to the cops.

My steps are lighter on the way back inside. The bite of cold air in my lungs clears out the lingering scent of death, and the darkness that surrounds me is comforting.

Even though it's only eleven, I'm already tired, longing for my bed and a book. We all have our vices, our guilty pleasures. For Zaid and Lucas, it's women. I'm not sure what Hale likes, but we all know he's addicted to work. I just like to quietly enjoy a book without any interruptions, distract myself from the world around me.

But when I get upstairs, my feet turn without thinking toward the room Grace is in. I need to see her again, for reasons that are beyond me. I know

we're all curious about the girl we grew up with, but this isn't just that. There's something in me that burns to see her—that makes it impossible to do the rational thing and just shove her out of my brain like I do so many other thoughts.

No one stands guard outside the bedroom. I decide I don't want to know what happened to Zaid, who was watching her earlier, or Hale, who was mysteriously followed by her scent. The door creaks as I push it open, taking a cautious glance in.

The room is dark, but my eyes adjust quickly, scanning her form on the bed. She's asleep, lying still and quiet with her arms bent over her head. The ropes are still around her wrists, binding her to the bed and keeping her from escaping.

She must be tired as fuck to sleep that way. It's an uncomfortable position that only lets you sleep when sheer exhaustion steals consciousness away.

I sit at the foot of the bed and look at her, wondering why she makes me feel the way she does.

It's a strange sort of feeling, one I'm not going to try to work out. I don't do that. I don't *examine* my feelings. I bury them. But out of curiosity, I let this emotion linger for a little while, not knowing what to make of it.

It's not attraction, though Grace is a very beautiful woman. She always has been. I used to watch the way she moved, the way she laughed, the lines and curves of her body—she's always been effortlessly graceful, as if her name was chosen to match who she is on the inside. What she's made of.

Grace.

It feels almost the same watching her now as it did back then—a feeling like it's just me and her in the world, my mind empty of any memory but *Grace*. Any scent but Grace. Any thought but Grace.

Sitting near her now, every wrong in my life feels miles away instead of nagging at the back of my mind. When I look at her, something settles inside me, making the beasts on my shoulder grow quiet for a moment.

Unconsciously, I memorize her features, wanting to keep this feeling with me.

I want to be able to recall the curve of her neck and shoulder, the dip in her throat, the bow of her lips. I want to remember what it feels like to be

sitting here with her when the demons come out. When I forget who I am
and that my body is my own.

Grace's eyelids flutter, but she doesn't stir.

I like the darkness, the silence.

I like being with her.

GRACE

“AND OF COURSE, a toast to my beautiful daughter.” My father lifts his glass, smiling at me from across the table. “On her fifteenth birthday.”

My mother sits to his right, smiling the dutifully demure smile of a woman who respects my father and his work. The smile of a mafia queen, a woman accustomed to ruling her household from behind the scenes.

The Blind Pour is packed, friends of my father from the syndicate and their families seated at the tables that fill the room. I can’t help the slight blush that warms my cheeks as everyone’s gazes settle on me. Most of them are people I only vaguely know from Dad’s work, but it hardly matters. There are only four sets of eyes I feel staring at me—everything else fades into the background.

At the table nearest mine, watching me with lopsided smiles and knowing smirks, are the wild four.

My secret crushes.

The four boys I’ve grown up alongside.

Zaid and Lucas, the twins, are carbon copies of each other with green eyes and blond hair highlighted by strands of copper. Lucas is the one with the flecks of brown in his eyes, only noticeable if you look closely; Zaid has slightly darker hair in the right lighting. They seem to do everything together, as if they’re connected telepathically somehow. Their movements, gestures, body language—it’s like watching a double image. I’m not sure if it’s practiced between them or natural, but either way, it’s amusing.

*They've only been part of our group for a few years, so I haven't known them my entire life like I've known *Ciro* and *Hale*. But it feels like I have. *Zaid* likes to joke that they make up for lost time by being so outgoing and charming. It makes it easy to forget that they haven't always been a part of my life.*

Ciro is quiet, but I like him. His hair is such a dark black that it almost looks blue when it catches the light, and his eyes are a steely gray that hold hints of blue too.

He tugs at the edges of his long sleeves, and I know it's to hide tattoos that I've seen glimpses of. Dark whorls of ink cage his arms and biceps, teasing the collar of his shirt and wrapping around his neck. I wonder how much of him is covered in ink, where the designs start and end. He hasn't said one word the entire dinner, but I've caught a smirk teasing at his lips, a gentle laugh escaping from time to time.

I like it when he laughs. I like when I make him laugh. Every one feels earned somehow, in contrast to *Zaid* and *Lucas*, who laugh often and with abandon.

And *Hale*...

He sits directly across from me. Perhaps the most attractive of the four young men, but definitely the most arrogant. He's the leader, and even though he's much younger than my father, my father seems to respect him. As the son of *Damian Novak*, he holds power—and he knows it. He doesn't shy away from it like some people might. His eyes are a striking dark blue, deep and overwhelming as a vast ocean. His brown hair glints in the light as he watches me, unblinking, and I find that I can't drag my gaze away from his.

"Grace," my mother says slowly, interrupting my thoughts and pulling my attention from the four boys at the other table. "Why are you wearing that monstrosity of fabric?"

Confused, I look down, expecting to see the outfit I had picked out for this day last week—a beautiful red dress that comes to the middle of my thigh, complementing the newly forming curves on my body.

But that's not what I'm wearing.

Instead, I'm wearing a mass of white fabric, with a full skirt and delicate beadwork on the bodice.

“I don’t... know.” I shake my head, running my fingertips over the dress—the wedding dress.

Pop!

Blood splatters over my hands and stains the soft white of the dress. I look up, hand closing over my mouth in horror at the sight of my dad—the back of his head blown off, splattered against the wall, eyes frozen in terror. Suddenly, we’re not around the table anymore, but at the church, and my veil is grasped in his hands as he falls to the ground, clutching his side.

I scream, but the noise is caught in my throat as a hand reaches out and drags me away from the scene, pulling me into protection. Someone large and powerful shields me with his body as he leads us away from the danger, pulling us into a room that’s safe.

But no. It’s not safe. I’ll never be safe here.

The room around me is the room I hate. The room I know all too well already, with the bare, water-stained walls and the ancient-looking wooden dresser set against one wall.

The room I’m held captive in.

I’m trapped on the bed again—only this time, my arms aren’t bound. I should be able to run for freedom, but I can’t move. The air feels like it’s on fire. It’s a thousand degrees in here, and I’m drenched in sweat, trying to pull away from the sheets and clothes sticking to my body.

The door creaks open, bringing with it a gentle waft of cool air and the one man I never wanted to see again.

Hale.

He moves across the barren bedroom and sits at the foot of the bed, watching me like a predator would watch his prey.

Waiting for the perfect moment to pounce.

To devour.

To destroy.

His eyes flicker with lust as he drags his gaze over me, contemplating.

“I always liked you in this dress,” he says as he reaches for my ankle, dragging me closer to him. I’m in the red dress again—or maybe my wedding dress has just been soaked completely through with blood. “After that dinner... after your birthday, I couldn’t stop thinking about you in it. ”

His hand roams higher up my leg, stopping at the back of my knee and caressing the inside of my leg. The warmth of his fingers is contrasted by

the shivers that follow in their wake, and my body feels alive to his touch.

“You’ve always haunted me, Grace.” He frowns, watching his hand as it strokes my skin. “Everything about you was so...”

As his fingers brush my inner thigh, I want to pull away, scream to myself to wake up because this is all a dream, I know it is.

But it feels just as real as the last time he touched me.

Hale’s hungry gaze moves up my body, and he crawls up onto the mattress to settle between my legs. His fingers skim over the crotch of my panties, and he smiles when he feels the wet heat of my arousal already soaking through the fabric. But this smile is different from the one he wore earlier, when he made me come to punish Zaid.

That smile was cold and hard as a block of ice.

This smile?

It’s all heat. All warmth and satisfaction. As if finding me wet and ready for him is the greatest gift he’s ever been given.

As if he likes seeing me this way.

“I thought you hated me,” I murmur, trying to find the hatred inside myself even as I speak. “I thought you said I was a liar.”

Hale looks up at me, his light touch still teasing my core. He slides a finger down the fabric, rubbing my folds through the thin barrier and drawing a breathy sigh from my lips.

“Are you?” There’s something almost like vulnerability in his eyes as he stares down at me. “Is this a lie?”

He strokes me again, and my inner walls clench as more wetness seeps from me. “No.”

Hale smiles broadly. Then, so fast I’m not prepared for it, he grabs the fabric of my panties in both hands and shreds the flimsy garment from my body, shoving my dress up around my waist. I gasp as cool air hits my pussy, and the gasp turns into a yelp when Hale buries his face between my legs.

When he pushed me over the edge with two fingers on my clit, there was always something controlled and methodical in his motions.

Not anymore.

There’s not a hint of restraint as he devours me, licking and sucking at my pussy as if it’s a meal he’s been starving for his whole life. He runs his

tongue up my slit, pressing so deep I can feel it inside me, before flicking the tip up and down over my clit so fast that stars dance in my vision.

“Hale!”

His name bursts from my lips before I can stop it, and at the sound of his name, he growls against my skin. The flat of his tongue drags across my sensitive bud as he laps at me, making heat spread through my entire body.

My head thrashes back and forth, and my thighs clamp around Hale’s head, pinning him in place. But he doesn’t seem to mind one bit. His big hands grip my legs, digging into the flesh deep enough to leave marks as he closes his lips over my pussy and sucks.

Pleasure explodes inside me like fireworks, and my back arches so hard that only my ass and the top of my head still touch the mattress.

I feel like I’m flying.

Like I’m falling.

Like I’ll never find solid ground again.

MY HEART RACES as consciousness rushes in, my eyes snapping open. My gaze struggles to come into focus, and as it does, I find myself staring into deep green eyes with brown specks—*Lucas*.

He hovers over me as if he was about to rouse me from sleep, but I sink farther into the bed, trying to pull away from him.

I don’t trust him, not after what his brother did.

Not after what *I* did with his brother.

“We need to get going, princess.” His hands are already working at the knots at my wrists; I barely have time to recover from my dream. “Rise and shine.”

The feeling of the ropes falling free is an immediate relief from a weight I didn’t know was holding me. I rub the area where the binds were, hoping to restore some of the warmth and circulation, rubbing the raw patches of skin where Hale tied them too tight, leaving angry red channels in my wrists.

“Where are we going?” I ask, lifting my head. My voice sounds like sandpaper, and that’s exactly what it feels like in my throat.

For the first time, my head doesn't seem to spin with the movement as I come to a sit. Somehow, I actually fell asleep. For how long, who knows, but I feel better now. Stronger. That's good. I'll need my strength if I'm going to try again to escape. I need to get back home. Back to Brian.

God, I hope he survived the shootout. Please let him be alive.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I take an assertive step. The world instantly tilts and spins around me, but Lucas lunges for me, grasping my arms in a steady hold. Instead of thanking him, I push him away, annoyed by the fact that I need help and unwilling to accept kindness from him.

Moments of kindness confuse me. Memories of the past muddy my feelings.

These men are my captors. My enemies.

I need to remember that, first and foremost.

"I'm hungry," I mutter thickly. I haven't eaten since I've been here, and fierce hunger tears through my stomach.

My legs wobble again, and I steady myself with a hand on the dresser. Lucas looks at me with concern, but I ignore him. I don't need his help.

"We'll get you something in a bit. Get dressed." He throws me a pile of clothes. "You'll need the warmth."

I catch the clothes with one hand, half of them falling to the ground. When I look at the garments, I'm suddenly thankful for something more decent to wear than what I had on—the stack consists of a pair of jeans, cable-knit sweater, fresh underwear, and socks. The room is warm, but gauging by the snow outside the window, I don't think I want to be wearing nothing but skinny jeans and a t-shirt wherever it is we're going.

I gather up the pieces I dropped, then wait for Lucas to leave the room and give me privacy, but he doesn't move. He just watches me absently.

Does he know about what happened with his brother? And with Hale?

I blush, barely restraining my fingers from reaching up to brush over my bruised lips. I can still feel Zaid's kiss. I can still feel Hale's fingers.

I wish like fuck that I couldn't.

"Well? Could you at least turn around?" I demand, my voice harsh and strained as I work to shove down memories I don't want.

The look on Lucas's face is enough to say he's not planning on moving an inch, and irritation rushes through me. He probably *has* heard about my

escape attempt with Zaid and doesn't want to risk it. Or they don't trust me enough to even let me get dressed without monitoring.

I turn around myself, so that at least he won't be able to see everything while I change.

But he sees enough.

As I quickly slide off my shirt and replace it with the sweater, I can feel Lucas's gaze trailing down my spine, lingering on my hips and legs. I shift sideways a little as I pull off the tight jeans and underwear, trying not to give him any more of a show than he's already getting.

I toss the old clothes aside with relief, glad to be getting rid of them and the memories they hold. They still smell faintly of musk and amber—of Zaid and Hale.

I swear my whole body flushes at the thought, and the temperature of the room skyrockets, but I try to push the resurgence of feelings aside as I pull the new jeans up and over my thighs. I wonder for a second if they bought these clothes specifically for me, or if they're leftover from their last captive.

My lips curl in a bitter grimace. *Probably the latter. Maybe I should consider myself lucky that she was my size, whoever she was.*

"Look... this isn't my place, but just don't push Hale right now," Lucas says suddenly, startling me out of my thoughts. "He's got a lot on his plate at the moment."

I turn around to face him, my eyebrows pinching together. A flare of something hot and almost painful blooms in me at his words.

"Oh, and I guess kidnapping old friends is one of the pressing matters on *Hale's plate*?" I bite out.

He stiffens, his lips pressing together. "You know it's not like that. It's not that simple."

I open my mouth to retort, to throw his words back in his face, but I'm interrupted by the door opening. Ciro walks in, and Lucas steps aside to give him space. I know before he even reaches me that the broad-shouldered, silent man is here to check on my wounds, so I prop one elbow on the dresser and lift up the edge of my sweater, my skin cooling at the shock of cool air that hits it.

Ciro looks at me as if to ask permission, and I nod, wondering what's changed in him. In some ways, he's the most gentle of the men, the most

Careful.

So why does he scare me so much?

He slowly peels off the bandage and sets it aside, dabbing a bit of antiseptic on my stitches. His thumb brushes over the area where the bullet penetrated me. The wounds where the bullet entered and exited ache, and the flesh is pink and angry looking, but I can tell they're healing well, thanks to his work.

Looking down at him as he tends to my injuries with complete focus, I almost want to thank him... but I can't. The words are caught in my throat. I don't want to give in to any of these men. To be grateful for any part of this.

To see them as anything other than monsters.

Compared to Hale's burning touch, Ciro's hands are gentle as he finishes bandaging the wounds, never lingering longer than he needs to. I glance between the top of his head and the quick work he makes with his hands, ripping off two pieces of medical tape and smoothing them over the gauze that covers my wounds.

Ciro catches my stare with his gray eyes, passive and blank. I hold his gaze for a split second before it becomes too much, then hastily pull my attention away. I can't bear the change I see in him. It's strange and unnerving, and it makes my chest ache for some reason I don't quite understand.

"What's going to happen to me?" I ask suddenly, and for once, the words sound as small as I feel. Scared.

Ciro's hands freeze at my waist, tensing. His fingers flex softly, squeezing my hip for a second before he draws away and grabs the tape again. He resumes his work without a word, and I redirect my stare toward Lucas, begging him to answer the question.

But the blond man's face reveals almost as little as Ciro's—just a flicker of something behind his eyes that I can't interpret. I wish I could pretend he cares about me, that he has any concern for what befalls me beyond how it affects his precious syndicate, but I know he doesn't.

I'm just another mission to all four of these men.

"I'm not sure," he finally says.

At Lucas's words, Ciro rips the tape violently, and I get the sense he has his own storm brewing inside of him.

But when the storm breaks, where will the lightning strike?

GRACE

THE BURST of cool air against my face is welcome at first, but as we step out of the house and into the cold, I'm quickly thankful for the warmer clothes Lucas gave me. The walk to the car isn't long, but snow crunches under my feet as I look around, trying to pick up some clue as to where we are.

Lucas leads me away from the house—a large retreat-like cabin, surrounded by trees and blanketed in snow.

This safe house is clearly located deep in the middle of nowhere. Mountains rise up on one side of us as the sun peaks over the horizon on the other side. It's early morning, and the air is still and quiet. There are no signs of civilization anywhere. If I try to run now, they'll have plenty of time to catch me before I reach another living soul who might offer help or protection.

And that's assuming I could even make it fifteen feet without one of them shooting me in the back of the head.

No. I need to be smart. Wait for the right moment.

Lucas nudges my back, pushing me toward the car. I swallow in trepidation as I step forward.

They must've swapped out vehicles while I was unconscious. Unlike the van they originally transported me in, this one is smaller, which means we're in closer confines. Hale sits in the driver's seat with Ciro by his side, and Zaid is already in the back. As Lucas shoves me onto the seat between him and Zaid, I catch a flash of Hale's eyes in the rearview mirror.

Don't even think about trying to run, they seem to say, as if he really does think I'm that stupid.

But I'm not an idiot. I may be too stubborn for my own good sometimes, but at least I learn from my mistakes.

I can see now that it was stupid of me to try to distract Zaid and escape yesterday. Even if I'd somehow managed to get away, I wouldn't have lasted an hour in this cold, stark wilderness.

The car's engine is already rumbling, and the warmth is welcome as Lucas closes the door to the outside world. He reaches over and buckles me in, his hand brushing my thighs, my hips. My toes clench inside the shoes Lucas gave me before we stepped outside, but I keep my gaze pointed firmly out the front windshield, trying to ignore the feeling of being pressed between the two men.

Suddenly, the heater feels like too much, burning my skin from the inside out.

If Zaid and Lucas are affected by our close proximity, they give no indication of it as I sit in silent suffocation, desperately trying not to think about the ways their legs are pressed up against my own, shoulders brushing shoulders, arm pressing into me as Zaid reaches over to hand Lucas something.

I take a deep breath and focus on the direction we're moving, headlights illuminating the falling snow and narrow road in front of us in the dim early morning light. The road twists and turns, bringing us down out of the foothills, and the food I ate before we left shifts uncomfortably in my stomach.

When the road finally levels out, the knot in my stomach barely eases at all. As terrifying as it was to wake up in a strange house, held captive by four men I used to know, it's even more terrifying to be on the move again.

Because it brings me one step closer to my ultimate fate.

Don't panic, I tell myself as the fear begins to rise in me. *You'll find a way out.*

I don't know where they're taking me, and I don't know what they plan to do with me once we get there—two facts that would terrify any sane person. But worrying myself sick isn't going to help me get free. I need to figure out where we're headed, and from there, think of a plan to escape.

“How long is the drive?” I ask, my voice sounding too loud in the quiet car.

Hale’s response is to reach over to the dash and turn the radio knob. Harsh music blasts through the car, so loud it makes me jump. Anger flares in me like a spark, but when I shift in my seat, I’m reminded of the two men who sit at my sides.

“Stop being a dick,” *Ciro* mutters, reaching for the volume and turning it down. “Answering one question won’t hurt anyone.”

Hale drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “The drive is as long as I want it to be.”

Great. Thanks, asshole.

Giving up that line of questioning, I ask, “And where are we going?”

I’m sure he’s not going to tell me, but I have to try. I don’t want to sit in his brooding silence for the next several hours, and I need any little scraps of information they might let slip.

Hale looks at *Ciro* as if to say, *I thought she would only ask one question, not play a game of fucking trivia*, but his gaze flickers back to mine in the rearview mirror.

“We’re going to another house.”

That’s vague. “Where?”

He doesn’t respond, focusing back on the road and sending the car back into silence. *Ciro* seems to sense that the conversation is over and reaches for the volume control again. He presses a few buttons to change the music, and a classical string piece fills the car, completely wrong for the atmosphere.

*Is this *Ciro*’s music? Is this what he likes?*

It seems so at odds with what I know about him, but then again, I don’t know anything about him.

Not anymore.

I should stop convincing myself I do.

After several more songs play, I decide to try a different approach to get them to talk.

“You know, there was a time when the tables were turned,” I venture, wondering how they’ll react. No one says anything, so I continue. “You know, when you protected me, not...”

“We’re still protecting you, Grace,” Lucas says, and I can feel his mood shift into the same brooding frustration that everyone else is feeling. “Things have just changed. Can you imagine what would have happened if we didn’t take you? Would you rather have been kidnapped by strangers? Or worse?”

He has a point, even if I don’t want to admit it. I’d rather be a captive of my onetime friends than by the other group of men who attacked my wedding.

“Who were the others?” I ask. “You really don’t know?”

Once again, the car is silent, until Zaid says, “No. We don’t.”

“Unless you want to tell us,” Hale butts in from the front seat.

Annoyance tears through me. We’ve been over this a thousand fucking times. He knows I don’t know anything about the people who were at my wedding other than that they weren’t supposed to be there.

“What about you, Ciro?” I ask, turning my focus to him in my newfound boldness. He doesn’t respond, so I stubbornly continue. “You’ve changed the most out of everyone. What happened to you?”

I feel Zaid and Lucas tense at my side, mirroring the tension that’s taken over Ciro’s frame. He stays completely still, shoulders rigid, looking out the window.

“You never used to be so... broody.” I try to think of the right word, but I don’t know what about him has changed. There’s just something *off* about him. “You were always quiet, but now you don’t say *anything*. See, you’re proving my point right now.”

Hale’s hands flex on the steering wheel, knuckles going white. He’s pissed. I’ve clearly broached a topic that is *off limits*, but it’s too late to stop now. The train has left the station, and it’s going full speed.

“Shut up, Grace,” Hale growls, staring at the road in front of him.

But I don’t.

“It can’t be that bad. Scorned love, maybe?” I wrack my brain for possibilities. I’m not really *that* curious, but something inside me is enjoying getting under these men’s skin for once. They’ve wreaked havoc on my emotional state since they barged back into my life and took me captive, so it’s satisfying as fuck to get a little payback. “Let’s see... Lucas or Zaid got promoted before you? Or maybe you’re just high all the time and—”

“Grace, stop it,” Lucas mutters.

“Why is everyone being so hard-headed?” I ask sarcastically. “It’s not like I’m asking much. I just want to catch up with some old friends—”

The car lurches as Hale stomps on the brakes. Lucas’s arm instantly flies out in front of my body, absorbing the impact better than the seatbelt could. In less than three seconds, Hale pulls to the side of the road, parks, and slides out of the car. Then he flings the back driver’s side door open.

Reaching over Zaid’s body, he pushes at my buckle and yanks me out of the car, then drags me with him through the snow and ice. My feet slide against the icy road, but he holds fast to me, flinching as he keeps me upright. As he pulls me off the road and into the woods out of sight of the car, I’m too pissed to worry about being murdered.

“Hale, stop it—” I try to tear away from him, but he throws me up against a tree, pinning me to it with his body.

“I told you to fucking stop.” He’s fuming. I try to drag my arm from his grip to push him away, but he presses into me tighter. “While you were off in your pretty little castle, sitting on your pretty little ass, the rest of us were still out here in the real world trying to clean up the mess you made when you decided to leave.”

I glare at him. “What the fuck are you talking about? It wasn’t my choice. My father was—”

“I don’t want any of your bullshit, *Grace*.” There’s something about the way he says my name that makes him sound like he despises it. Like he despises me. “You don’t know what *Ciro* has been through, so don’t fucking push him.”

“He didn’t say anything about it,” I insist, even though I should really drop it. “So who’s the one overreacting, Hale? Who’s the one who dragged me out of the car and through the woods for no reason other than to work through his pissy attitude? Looks like you’re the only one worried here—”

“When you push my friend who can’t speak up for himself, yeah, I’m going to stand up for him.” He lowers his voice to a lethal calm as he presses his weight into me. Tree bark snags on my sweater, and the wounds in my side pulse in time to my thudding heartbeat. “You don’t have the privilege of knowing what *Ciro* has been through, because you weren’t there for him on the nights he couldn’t remember his name, on the nights when his head was in the toilet because he was trying to drink it all away.

You weren't there when his scars were healing, so you don't get to know what he's been through unless *he* tells you."

His fierce words penetrate the anger and adrenaline surging through me. I don't understand exactly what he's talking about, but the hints he's given me of *Ciro's* past are enough to make my stomach turn over.

My chest rises and falls with my heavy breaths, brushing up against his with every movement. The tips of my fingers are freezing, reminding me of the cold, but every inch of my body that *Hale* touches is on fire.

"Why the hell do you care so much, *Hale*?" I bite out, squeezing my hands between us to shove against his pecs. "You've always been an asshole. Since when did you give a shit about how anybody feels but yourself?"

I'm playing with fire. I know that.

But I can't stop.

His heart pounds against my palms as I wait for him to move his body, but he doesn't. His legs are pressed against my thighs, his body caging me in. The heat of my skin could melt the snow around us, and I flush when I realize what part of him is pressing into me.

"I care about *Ciro*." His voice is hard. "A hundred times more than I care about you. So we're gonna stay right here until you fucking apologize. Are you ready to say you're sorry?"

"No," I answer honestly. "I'm not apologizing for being curious."

He grits his teeth, smiling like a wolf. Feral. Predatory. "Then it looks like we're gonna be here for a while."

He still doesn't move, and I try to look past his shoulder, suddenly wondering how far away from the car we are. The low sun illuminates *Hale's* face, casting shadows that only serve to highlight the vicious angles of his features. We're alone out here. Just me and him.

Me and this beast of a man.

I try to shift away from him, but I'm met only with a tightening of his grip and the familiar hardness pressing into my stomach. My core clenches. It's so wrong—everything about this is *wrong*.

"You're a fucking hypocrite," I blurt, my voice raspy with a mix of anger and desire. "You act so outraged by everything I do, but maybe that's just because you like punishing me so much. It seems to me you *like* being provoked."

To prove my point, I grind my hips against him, punishing both him and myself. He's hard as steel against me, reminding me of everything that happened in the bedroom earlier—every stroke of his fingers, every touch of his hands.

"Are you still pissed?" My lips curl in a sneer as I move my hips again. "Is your dick pissed off, Hale?"

"Fuck."

He bites out the word as his hands settle on my hips, digging his fingers into my flesh to still my movements. He's strong, but I still arch my back against his hold, feeling his cock jerk in response. I watch as his jaw muscles ripple and his nostrils flare.

He's glaring down at me like he wants to fucking kill me, although he hasn't stepped away. He meant what he said earlier. He's not going to move until I apologize.

But he forgets—I can be just as stubborn as he is, and I'm *not* going to let him win this time.

I tilt my chin up, my lips almost brushing his.

"Am I a *weakness* to you?" I whisper as the warmth of his exhale fans my mouth, a teasing touch.

His gaze snaps to mine, his cobalt eyes flashing.

There, I think. Gotcha.

"That's it, isn't it?" I smile fiercely, a swell of victory rising in my chest at the knowledge. Hale hates me because I'm his weakness. Because this man who thrives on control loses it around me.

"Stop it," he says quietly, a dark warning in his tone.

But I don't.

"Is that why you did what you did back at the house? Because you just couldn't help yourself?" I use the tree behind me as leverage to press my body closer to his, taunting him. His fingers sink deeper into the flesh of my hips, but I ignore that warning too.

"Grace..."

My lip curls as I stare defiantly up at him. "You made it seem like I was the weak one for giving in, for needing to come, but you're worse than I am, aren't you? I'm a prisoner, Hale." I shift my hips again. "Tell me. Who are you a prisoner of?"

His nostrils flare, and I can feel the tension vibrating through his body, as if he's being pulled in two directions at once. As if the opposing impulses raging inside him might actually kill him.

"I told you to fucking stop," he growls.

"Or what?"

And it's those two little words that make him snap.

He releases his grip on my hips so fast that my body jerks at the loss of resistance, slamming into him as he crushes me against the tree. There's not an inch of space between us now, and I can feel the hard press of his cock against my stomach as he buries his face in my hair.

I'm pinned against the hard, unforgiving bark of the tree, trapped entirely by the size and weight of Hale's body. My sweater snags on the rough texture as he shoves an arm between us, undoing my pants enough for him to slip his hand inside.

His fingertips don't tease my clit like they did last time. They don't tease me at all.

Instead, he plunges two fingers inside me, groaning when he feels my core clench around them. The heel of his hand puts pressure on the sensitive bundle of nerves as he withdraws his fingers and thrusts again, deeper this time.

His harsh breaths sound loud in my ear, and he rocks his hips against me in time to the movement of his hand—as if he wishes desperately that it was his cock inside me, not his fingers.

There's no control at all in this version of Hale, no finesse or calculation.

There's just the raw, brutal strength of his need.

I wish I felt nothing.

I wish I could claim my promised victory by finding the blankness in myself that I want so desperately to have.

By not caring.

By not letting him affect me.

But the truth is, he's my weakness too.

My toes curl in my borrowed shoes, and sensation roars through me until I think I might burst from it. My hands clutch at him, fingers digging into the thick muscles of his back and shoulders. The bark tugs at my hair as I tilt my head back, trying to make it easier for my lungs to drag in air.

I can't catch my breath. My gasps are a counterpoint to Hale's rough exhales in the quiet, still air of the woods. We both refuse to make any other sound than that, but somehow the muffled noises of desperate need turn me on even more. I can *feel* how out-of-control Hale is, and I like knowing that if I'm spinning out, at least he is too.

Then he hooks his fingers, hitting a place in me that I've never felt in quite this way before, and as he grinds his hand against my clit again, two different kinds of pleasure collide inside me.

"Ahh!"

I won't let myself scream his name, so an inarticulate noise rips from my throat instead as my whole body shudders in his hold. Hale keeps working my core and my clit, keeps working those two sensitive spots that make ecstasy unfold inside me, and I let out another breathless cry before the orgasm finally rolls to a stop.

I feel like I got hit by a car. Like I've been physically jarred by the force of the sensations that slammed into me.

Hale's hand finally stills, but he presses his hips against me again, the heat of his hard cock like a brand even through the layers of clothes that separate us. This is the second time he's made me come without finishing himself, and as I feel the way his hips swirl and grind against mine, I wonder if he'll leave it here.

Will he press for more? Will he force me?

But incrementally, his body relaxes. He's still hard, and I can feel the small shudder in every exhale, but he makes no move at all for several long minutes.

Then he slips his hand from my pants, brushing against my sensitive clit, which still throbs in the aftermath of his touch. Gently, he pulls the zipper back up my pants, sliding the button through the buttonhole. His touch is almost tender as his hand drags up my body and takes my chin, tilting my face up to meet his.

Our lips are so close that we'd only have to move an inch for them to meet.

The entire time he touched me, we never kissed. I don't know if it was intentional or not, but I have a feeling if we did, it would start a fire that would consume us both.

An inferno that would burn us to the ground.

“You don’t want to know what happened to Ciro,” he says quietly.

I meet his gaze in the soft morning sunlight, swallowing back any snarky remarks as a shift of conviction washes through me, along with a small pang of guilt. Maybe I really shouldn’t have pushed Ciro like that. I don’t know what happened to him in the six years we were apart, but from what Hale has hinted at, it was beyond awful.

I should probably poke at that open wound over and over again, using what little knowledge I have of Ciro’s trauma to try to get him to snap. I should push his buttons until he makes a mistake that gives me an opening to flee.

But I find that I don’t want to.

Not just because it could be dangerous and possibly get me killed, like throwing rocks at a sleeping bear. But because I don’t want to hurt him like that.

I don’t want to cause him more pain.

Of all of these men, Ciro has been the kindest to me. He hasn’t manhandled me or yelled at me. He’s taken care of my wounds, practically keeping me alive all this time, and how do I repay him?

Fuck.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, but the words aren’t directed at Hale, and he knows that.

His body eases off of mine, and he gestures back the way we came. I follow the path of our footprints until the road appears, with the car still parked on the shoulder. Hale holds the door open for me, and in a matter of seconds, I’m pressed between the twins in the back seat again.

Goddammit. I’m in so fucking far over my head I can’t even see sunlight anymore, I think as I reach for the buckle, my body burning.

“Ciro...” My gaze flicks toward the front seat. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed you. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I want to say something more, but I don’t really know what else to add. It’s weird enough that I voluntarily apologized to one of my captors and actually meant it, and I don’t really want to dwell on why that is.

The dark-haired man doesn’t respond, but I notice that his body relaxes a little, tension easing from his shoulders. Reading Ciro is all about reading his subtle body cues, and I’m satisfied enough by that reaction to drop it.

As Hale pulls away from the side of the road, a car buzzes past us.

It takes me a few seconds to register it—a few seconds too late.

My heart lurches in my chest. Shit. If Hale and I had lingered in the woods for just a minute longer, if we'd arrived back at the road at the same moment...

Maybe I could've done something. Signaled for help or flagged down the driver.

Next time, I promise myself as I watch the scenery whizz by.

Because there *will* be a next time.

ZAID

WE MAKE good time getting to the next safe house—a place that's set up just like the last one, perfect for hiding away. As soon as we arrive, Hale and Ciro bring Grace inside while Lucas and I unpack the car. We stopped for some food and basic necessities in the last town we passed through, since this safe house has been unused for a while. We try to make sure the houses aren't shut up for long periods of time, but it happens.

Once we're all settled in, Lucas wanders off to the kitchen to grab a drink while I head down the hall into the back of the house. It's been a long day of driving, and I need a shower.

Turns out, having Grace pressed up against me for a full fucking eight hours is a new form of torture I never thought I'd experience. My skin buzzes with an energy I know isn't good for me right now, and I can smell her sweet floral scent all over me. I'm not supposed to be distracted by her, but that's easier said than fucking done.

After locking the door behind me, I run the shower, turning the knob until the spray is as hot as I can take. Steam begins to fill the small space, and I tug my shirt over my head with one hand. When I shove my pants and boxers down, I hiss as my hand brushes my hardened cock. I've been sporting a semi for what feels like the entire fucking day, and my balls ache with pressure.

Jesus. I need some goddamn relief.

The memory of watching Grace come in front of me has been lingering too close to the front of my thoughts ever since last night. Sitting next to her

in the car, everything in me wanted to pin her to the seat like a fucking animal, or to haul her into my lap and taste her sweet lips again.

But fate loves to tease you with what you can't have. Loves to give it to someone else and make you watch.

Hale and Grace coming back from the woods... her face flushed, her breath quick, although she tried to hide it.

I try to push away the jealousy as I step into the scalding shower, knowing it won't do me any good to linger over the events of the day.

What happened in the woods?

I should reach for the soap, but instead, I reach for myself, wrapping my hand around my cock and moving my fist up and down the length. I'm already hard as fucking steel just thinking about her.

The way she looked when she was splayed out on the bed in our first safe house, Hale's hand moving rhythmically beneath her panties as she bucked and writhed beneath him... it's an image that will haunt me forever. I almost came in my pants like a fucking teenager, watching her fall apart under his touch. Wishing it was me touching her.

Jesus. I wish I could've kissed her as she came apart. Felt her body shudder, felt the desperate strokes of her tongue against mine as she tried to survive the brutal orgasm Hale dragged out of her. I wanted to feel her whimpers against my skin, feel her fingernails at my back.

I want fucking *everything*.

"Fuck, Grace. Fuck," I grunt as my balls tighten, jets of cum spilling over my hand and the shower wall.

My body shudders as I try to make the orgasm last as long as possible, drawing out the pumps of my hand as images continue to flood my mind. Thoughts of her pretty little legs, spreading for Hale...

Hale.

He was furious when he walked in and found me in a compromising position with Grace. And he's not wrong that I fucked up by letting her get to me like that. But I'd bet every damn thing I own that my screw-up wasn't the only reason he was so pissed. In fact, it wasn't even the main reason.

The reason he went after me so hard, the reason he did what he did to punish me, didn't have jack shit to do with our mission.

It only had to do with Grace.

With what he wants just as much as I do.

Not even Hale can resist her, and I know he fucking hates that. She's getting under everyone's skin, fucking everything up.

I shouldn't let her do this to me. I shouldn't let her hold this much power over my thoughts, my mind, but I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop thinking about how fucking turned on I was, how I directly disobeyed Hale's orders—more than once.

I wasn't supposed to touch her.

I wasn't supposed to undo her binds.

I wasn't supposed to jerk myself off like a desperate fucking teenager as Hale touched her.

But I did.

I did all of those things, and I couldn't stop. Not when her little whimpers and moans filled my senses, not when her hips arched and she begged for release that I couldn't give her.

We should have left her behind.

The thought crashes into my mind like a brick through a fucking window.

If we'd left her back at the church, we would have left a whole shitload of problems behind. Grace means trouble, and I can't seem to stop chasing the trouble she's so readily supplying. We'd be better off without her. Despite Hale's insistence that she must know something about what her dad was up to or how that other group tracked him down, I don't think she was lying.

She's not meant to be a part of this. Her father dragged her out of our world six years ago, and she should've been allowed to stay out of it.

But if we'd left her...

Then whoever the fuck those other assholes at the church were, they'd have her now. She'd be their captive.

My hands curl into fists as I rest my forearms against the cool tile of the shower wall, dropping my head. I hate the thought of Grace with anyone but us. I hate the thought of what that other group of men could've done to her if they'd managed to steal her away.

She belongs with us.

Letting out a growl of frustration, I turn the shower to cold, letting the freezing water cool my skin. It barely helps bring my mind into focus, but

anything is better than nothing at this point. I need to stop this shit. Get myself in a better headspace.

Flicking off the water, I reach for a towel and wrap it around my waist, checking the time on my phone as I step out of the shower. Hale said he'd check in with his father once we got settled in for the night, which means that he should have news soon.

Hopefully.

I catch my own reflection in the mirror, glancing over my broad chest and shoulders, lingering on the scars and marks on my body. There are so many of them that I don't even remember where half of them came from anymore, what their stories are. I've considered getting tattoos to cover a few of the larger ones, but that's always been *Ciro's* thing.

Grimacing, I press my fingers to the small cut and the purpling bruise on my cheek from Hale's fist.

I know I'll remember where this scar came from.

I'll never fucking forget it.

Shaking my head and sending wet droplets flying, I step away from the mirror. *Focus, Zaid. Focus on the damn mission.*

I make quick work of changing into fresh clothes, then wander through the house to look for the rest of my team. I find the three of them surrounding the dining room table, each wearing a serious expression. Hale is on his feet, but *Ciro* and *Lucas* are sitting, so I take a seat next to my brother and wait for our commander to spill the news.

Hale stops pacing, turning to face the three of us.

Fuck. I can already tell this isn't going to be good.

"I spoke to my father," he says, leaning against the table.

By the tension in his shoulders, it's clear his conversation with the head of our syndicate didn't go well. Hale's father is a good man and a good leader, but his tolerance for mistakes is pretty much nil—it's how he built the *Novak Syndicate* into one of the most powerful mafia organizations in the country.

And although it's hard to see how we could've handled the church debacle any better than we did, there's no denying it turned into a shit-show. No denying that we failed in our assigned mission.

We were supposed to bring *Samuel Weston* back to Chicago alive, and we sure as hell aren't doing that.

“We’re to bring Grace in,” Hale continues, his voice hard and his expression set. “In place of Samuel. Since she’s the only Weston left alive, my father wants her instead.”

All three of us nod, but I can feel the tension that settles over the room. This directive could mean any number of things for Grace’s future. No matter what Damian Novak decides, we won’t get a say in the final decision. And even though none of us want to admit it, Grace has gotten under each of our skins, one way or another.

I haven’t seen her in six years, but it only took two days for her to consume my thoughts.

“It’s not part of the original plan.” Hale sounds irritated. He *hates* when the original plan doesn’t go as it was supposed to, and I can tell this is messing with him. He’s a control freak. He likes things neat and orderly, and nothing about this situation is even remotely close to either of those words. “But since Samuel died at the church, she’s all that’s left. Whether my father wants to try to get information out of her or use her as bait, I don’t know yet.”

Ciro drums his fingers against the table, pressing his lips together as his eyes churn.

I can guess what he’s thinking about. Ciro handles a lot of our interrogations, and although Damian has a policy against hurting women, it’s possible he’d make an exception for the daughter of the man who betrayed his entire syndicate. The man who put Damian’s brother in jail for life.

The room is silent as we each process Hale’s news, individually trying to sort things out.

The thought of giving up Grace like that, just handing her over like a fucking prisoner, makes my hands shake with rage, but I know I need to push it aside. Bury it. There’s no such thing as *mercy* in the mafia, and just because we all knew her when we were kids...

“Things haven’t changed,” Hale says, finishing my thoughts as if he can read my fucking mind. “Not in the way that we deal with threats to the syndicate. But other things *have* changed in the past six years. Circumstances. Loyalties. We can’t live in the past. We can’t be nostalgic. We have to live in the present.”

“And this is how things are now,” Ciro mutters, pushing back from the table.

His chair skims the floor, nearly toppling over from the force. He hates this just as much as the rest of us, but there’s nothing we can do about it.

This is how things are, I echo silently.

GRACE

TIME HAS BLENDED INTO NOTHINGNESS.

A glance at the dashboard clock shows that we've now been on the road for six hours with no stopping. We left the safe house early this morning, in the same procession as last time. Lucas brought me a fresh pair of clothes, waited for me to get dressed, then brought me out to the car where all the other guys waited. They all looked serious and stoic as always, and wide awake too—as if it wasn't five o'clock in the damn morning.

We've passed a grand total of four cars in six hours, and every time we did, my heart skipped a beat and my muscles tensed.

But I haven't had another opportunity like the one I missed when Hale pulled over yesterday. So I keep biding my time.

I turn in my seat a little, trying to stretch my stiff muscles, but brush up against Zaid's body. He doesn't say or do anything, not even shifting to give me more space, and I feel a flame of awareness spike through me when I meet his brooding green eyes. I quickly look away, focusing my gaze on the miles of road in front of us.

The best way to protect myself isn't to put up a fight or cower in fear, I'm learning. Because the true danger isn't from the four men who surround me—or at least, not at the moment. The most dangerous thing right now is the strange pull I feel toward each one of them. It's messing with my head.

So the best way to protect myself is to emotionally and mentally withdraw into myself, to ignore my reaction to them and their reaction to me.

To pretend they're just my captors and have never been anything more.

"You're going to need to get gas soon," Ciro says quietly, interrupting my thoughts.

"I'm aware," Hale replies. He rolls his neck, easing the stiffness out of his shoulders. "We'll grab something to eat while we're at it."

Thank god. As if on cue, my stomach grumbles loudly.

"You hungry, Grace?" Hale glances up at the rearview mirror, his gaze finding mine instantly.

I don't answer. I haven't spoken a word to him since our encounter in the woods, and I intend to keep it that way for as long as possible. There's nothing I want to say to him, and every time we speak, he gets deeper into my head.

Into my soul.

Into my fucking pants.

Memories of his hand delving down the front of my jeans, of his deft fingers working my body like he fucking owned it, filter through my mind. Heat burns low in my belly, a mixture of latent arousal and deep shame.

It was a mistake. I shake the memories away, wishing the mild ache between my legs would leave with them. *I won't let it happen again.*

These men are my captors, no matter our past lives. Just because they're still attractive doesn't mean they aren't dangerous. They're my enemies. I screwed up twice, and I promise myself I'm not going to let it happen again.

I've lost control over so many things in my life recently. I'm not going to let my body be one of them.

Or my mind, for that matter.

Because at this point, my thoughts are just as dangerous.

I slip back into my state of emotional distance, keeping my gaze trained on the road. The guys briefly debate about how soon to stop and what type of food they want to eat, but I don't offer any input into the conversation. If I can convince them that I'm closed off and don't care, maybe they'll leave me alone.

A few minutes later, the back roads turn to small houses and buildings—a small town, but a town nonetheless.

"Up on the right. There," Ciro says, pointing out the window.

Hale pulls into a small parking lot near a quaint looking diner and finds a spot to park, turning off the car.

“Ciro, you come with me,” Hale instructs. “Zaid and Lucas, stay here with Grace.”

I immediately want to protest, but I know Hale’s only word is his final word.

Zaid and Lucas seem just about as thrilled as I am at the thought of sitting in the car even longer, but they don’t say anything as Hale slams the door shut, pulling his jacket tight to his body as he and Hiro walk through the cold air and into the diner.

I keep my gaze on the two men as the waitress offers them a menu, clearly flirting with Hale. She taps her fingernails on the bar counter, watching him with bright eyes.

“What the fuck is going on?” Lucas is watching the scene just like I am, and he shakes his head with a low chuckle. “Shit, Miss Blondie clearly needs some action.”

Annoyance burns through me as I clamp my mouth shut, knowing anything I say won’t paint me in a good light. Because for some reason, as I watch *Miss Blondie* flirt with Hale, something like jealousy cages around my heart, squeezing it.

“Can we walk for a minute?” I ask abruptly. They don’t say anything, so I press my case harder. “We’ve been driving for hours without stopping, and my legs are cramping. It’s the least you could do.”

I need to get out of this car, sitting with Lucas and Zaid pressed up against me, before I go mental and lose it. I need to get away from where I can see Hale and Hiro looking like normal small town boys, flirting with the waitress.

I can sense Lucas and Zaid sharing a glance over my head, weighing the consequences. I want to reassure them that I have no plans of running, but I know opening my mouth would just make things worse.

“Fuck it,” Zaid says, unbuckling his seatbelt. “I’m stiff as shit too. It can’t hurt anything.”

Lucas shrugs and unbuckles his belt too.

My heart jumps, nearly climbing up into my throat. I can’t believe my luck as I quickly follow suit, sliding out of the car after Zaid. Despite feeling stiff in the car, my legs turn into jelly as I take my first few steps. I

steady myself with a hand on the car as Lucas and Zaid stretch, talking to each other in low voices.

Lucas looks down at his watch, then back up at me. “Five minutes, that’s it.”

“Fine with me,” I mutter.

The twins stick close on either side of me as we wander a little way down the street. Subtly, I observe the buildings around me, looking for any clues as to where we are. There are plenty of businesses with the name of the town on them, but some random small town name doesn’t help me figure out what state we’re in, or how close we are to where I think we’re going.

Chicago.

It’s the only reasonable place I can think of where they would take me—back to the pit of vipers I thought I’d left behind for good. It’s clear the syndicate wanted something from my dad, and now they want something from me. But I’m really not sure what I can give them. I don’t know anything.

We come to a crosswalk, but I don’t want to waste time waiting for the light to clear, so I turn the corner instead. Zaid and Lucas instantly stiffen, though they try to hide it.

A second later, I realize why.

Two men walk past us, dipping their heads in silent greeting. Two men dressed in blue uniforms, guns strapped to their hips, shiny badges at their breasts.

Cops.

The taller of the two looks at me for a half-second too long, his gaze snagging on me. It’s not a lewd glance, just one of mild interest, like he’s wondering if he’s seen me somewhere before.

Instinctively, I give him a brief nod but tuck my head down, walking by them quickly without another glance. My heart pounds in my chest, and confliction rages inside me. Maybe those cops could have helped me, but even if I’d made a move to signal that I’m being held against my will, I know it wouldn’t have ended well. Zaid and Lucas are both carrying concealed weapons, and the two men we passed were small town police officers. They’re not prepared to go up against members of the Novak Syndicate.

“Good call, Grace,” Zaid mutters in my ear, walking closely by my side. His hand falls to the small of my back as if to guide me, but I flinch, pulling away from his touch.

Smack!

My body collides with something, and I stumble backward. “Ohmygod —”

My ass hits the cold ground with a hard *thump* before I realize there’s a middle-aged woman on the ground with me. I ran right into her when I was distracted by Zaid.

“Oh. I’m so sorry,” the woman says good-naturedly.

“No, it’s completely my fault—”

The words stick in my throat as my gaze drops to the ground.

Fuck. There it is. My chance.

I have seconds to act. My heart crashes against my ribs like a drumbeat as I lean forward a little, shaking my head. “No, it was my fault. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

She chuckles breathlessly, and I try to keep a smile on my face as I grasp blindly for the phone I just saw fall from her purse.

My fingertips brush over the smooth surface. I snatch it up, slipping it discreetly into the waistband of my pants just before Lucas helps me up, apologizing to the woman as Zaid helps her to her feet.

There’s so much adrenaline raging through my veins that I feel sick and shaky, and I can’t tell if either of the men saw what I did.

Please. Please don’t let them have seen.

They apologize to the woman again, charming her with easy smiles, but as soon as she walks away, Lucas is dragging me back to the car, moving at a fast clip. I can practically feel the tension radiating from him, mixing with the nerves in my own body and adding to the frantic beat of my heart.

That could have gone horribly wrong.

When the car is in sight, I almost let out a sigh of relief, picking up my pace even more. If I can just get to the next safe house, or wherever we’re going, then I can call Brian and get help. If I can keep the phone a secret and find a safe place to use it.

Just as we’re climbing into the car, Hale and Ciro step out of the diner with bags of food in their hands. By the look on his face when he catches

sight of us, Hale clearly isn't happy about Zaid and Lucas's decision to let me stretch my legs.

He stalks toward us with Ciro right behind him, and the second we're all inside the vehicle, he cranks the key in the ignition, pulling away from the curb. The gentle hum of heat coming through the vents is drowned out by his angry voice as he glances over his shoulder at his two men.

"What the *fuck* were you thinking?"

"Everything's fine, okay?" Zaid holds up a hand, keeping his tone low. "Nothing happened. We just walked up the street and back."

For some reason, Zaid avoids saying anything about the cops who passed by us or the fact that I plowed into some poor woman—probably to save his own ass more than to protect me.

The phone buzzes gently against my skin and my heart drops into my stomach.

Please don't ring, I plead silently in my head, pulse racing.

Hale's eyes flicker toward mine in the rearview as if he can read my thoughts, and a fresh wave of terror washes through me. But his gaze doesn't linger, transferring instead to Lucas.

"I don't want that kind of shit to happen again." His voice is hard. "Remember what I said last night. Things have fucking changed."

I have no idea what he's referencing, but it's clear that for once, he's more pissed at his two friends than he is at me.

Lucas nods, and Hale grunts, turning back onto the highway. I shift in my seat a little, buckling myself in and subtly adjusting the phone in my waistband. It's stopped vibrating, thank fuck.

When I look up, I catch Ciro watching me. He's turned halfway around in the front seat to pass out the food he and Hale got from the diner, and his brows twitch slightly as he takes in my expression.

Can he see the secrets written on my face?

Does he know?

Does he suspect?

I meet his gaze, affixing a wobbly smile to my face. "Thank god. I'm starving. Can we eat now?"

He nods slowly, and I don't know if his gaze flickers to the phone hidden beneath my waistband and sweater or if I'm just imagining it.

THE SUN HAS JUST SET as the city skyline comes into view ahead of us.

Chicago. Just like I guessed.

It looms on the horizon like it's rising straight out of my memory—high-rise buildings with specks of lights flickering on, the rush of cars and traffic nearly manic in the gathering twilight. The city comes alive in the darkness, all the ugliness and violence hidden under a smudge of shadow.

A small feeling of nostalgia blooms in my stomach as we drive deeper and deeper into the heart of the city, and I can't help but stare out the window, soaking in all the familiar sights and places I used to know so well, lost in memories of my life before.

When I was so far away from all of this in Washington, it was easy to forget how big a part this city played in my early life. I spent all of my childhood and more than half of my teenage years here, going to school here, hanging out with friends and becoming a young woman. It was foolish of me to think I could just leave it behind—that I could pretend the first sixteen years of my life never happened.

I catch Hale and Ciro watching me as I stare out the window at the city. I suddenly feel strange, like I've been caught doing something I shouldn't, and turn my gaze to the floor, trying to ignore the buildings and street corners that pass by outside.

Chicago is big, and with several slowdowns from heavy traffic, it's fully dark by the time Zaid holds up the blindfold, gesturing for me to turn toward him. I knew this was coming, so I don't even resist as he ties the cover over my eyes, plunging my vision into darkness.

Time passes differently when you can't see, the small moments and milestones blending into each other to create a mass of empty space.

By the time the car comes to a halt, I know that we've been through a burner route, something to disguise our true location. Whether we drove for ten minutes or thirty, I can't really tell.

When Lucas pulls off the blindfold and reveals the inside of a garage, I press my lips together in frustration. We could be anywhere in the damn city—somewhere I'm familiar with or not—and I wouldn't know. Pissed, I

put up a little resistance as Lucas pulls me out of the car and up a small flight of stairs.

We walk into a home gym, lights flickering on with our movement. I'm reflected on every surface of the mirrored walls, a hundred scared and frustrated Graces watching me. Waiting for me to act.

Zaid, Hale, and Ciro follow behind us with their few travel bags in hand as Lucas guides me through the house.

Or maybe *mansion* is a better word. The place is huge and clearly very expensive, and I wonder suddenly if all the men live here together. It's entirely possible. They're a team, a unit, and if none of them are married or in a serious relationship, maybe it makes sense for them all to be under the same roof.

Are any of them in a serious relationship?

Stop thinking about it, Grace.

Their living arrangement is no business of mine, beyond how it factors into my possible escape.

"This way." Lucas tugs me away from the rest of the guys, and we head up a wide staircase and down a corridor on the second floor. About halfway down the hall, he opens a door and gestures me inside.

I blink as I step through the doorway and look around. Windows on the wall opposite the door are clothed in sheer curtains that shut out the dark city. A large bed sits in the middle of the room, perfectly fitted up with lush white sheets and blankets. My feet sink into the thick carpet beneath my shoes, and I suddenly worry about getting something dirty.

"This is going to be your room," Lucas tells me.

This bedroom is a thousand times nicer than the last two I slept in, but knowing that I'll be under constant watch or tied to the bed already makes it feel like a prison to me.

I glance around the room again, barely taking anything in. I only have one thought on my mind, and that's calling Brian.

"I need to pee," I blurt.

Maybe I should have been more subtle about it, should have waited at least a few hours, but I can't. I'm anxious to be alone, and the bathroom is the only place I'm sure they'll leave me alone.

Or at least, they have so far.

"Yeah. All right."

With a sideways glance at me, Lucas guides me to the adjoining bathroom. For a split second, I'm afraid he's going to follow me in, but then he shuts the door behind me. As I reach for the lock, I hesitate. The shadow of his feet outside the door haven't moved, and I don't want to alert him to anything suspicious. Besides, the lock is probably disabled anyway.

So instead, I flick on the bathroom fan. My breath freezes in my lungs as I wait for him to bust down the door and accuse me of something, but seconds pass and nothing happens.

My hands shake as I pull the phone from my waistband, thanking god for small-town women who still use flip phones. There's not even a passcode required to unlock it. With one final glance toward the door, I quickly type in Brian's number.

Please let this work.

GRACE

THE PHONE RINGS ONCE.

Twice.

Three times.

My heart beats faster with each ring, and my hope fades as I listen to the endless dialing. I hadn't even considered that Brian wouldn't pick up. He's been my saving grace, my knight in shining armor. The one I've pinned all my hopes on.

If I can't get through to him, I could try calling the police, but that's a risk in and of itself. There are plenty of dirty cops in this city, and if they tell the syndicate I called for help, I'm as good as dead.

"Hello?" A deep voice cuts through the darkness of my thoughts.

My heart drops to my stomach in an instant, and I'm so thankful to hear a voice—*his* voice—that my words get stuck in my throat.

Precious seconds, Grace. You're wasting precious seconds.

"It's me, Brian." My voice is choked with emotion and so quiet I'm afraid he won't even be able to hear me. "It's Grace."

"Grace! Holy shit, baby, are you okay—"

"Listen to me," I whisper quickly. "Just listen. I don't have long, so don't ask questions or interrupt me."

"Okay." I can hear the worry and strain in his tone, but just like I hoped he would, he immediately drops into *cop mode*. He knows how to stay calm in a crisis, and I've never been more fucking grateful for that.

“I’m in Chicago. I saw the city when we were driving in, but they took a burner route, so I don’t know my exact location.”

“Who? Who took you?” For a second, his voice cracks with emotion, and I’m no longer talking to the calm police officer, but to my terrified fiancé. “I thought you were dead, Grace. Fuck, I thought you were gone forever.”

“I’m not. I’m alive.” Tears burn the backs of my eyes. “I’ll find a way back to you. I promise. I don’t know exactly where I am, but I’ll try to find out. I’ll call you as soon as—”

There’s a heavy knock on the door, followed by Lucas’s voice. “What the fuck is the hold up in there?” he calls. “We don’t have all day, Grace.”

“Shit.” I glance at the door again, praying Lucas can’t hear me. “The Novak Syndicate. That’s who took me. I have to go.”

“Wait, tell me—”

I quickly hang up the phone without saying goodbye and flush the toilet even though I haven’t used it. Hitting the end call button was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but the comfort of hearing Brian’s voice will all be for nothing if Lucas finds me with this phone.

“Should I be worried about you?” Lucas’s words are filled with suspicion. He knocks again, a sharp rap of his knuckles against the wood. “Grace?”

“No!” I call out as I scan the bathroom for hiding spots.

There’s nothing that I can see, and panic is starting to creep through my body, making me freeze up. I know that if he’s suspicious now, he’s going to search the bathroom when he comes in. If he finds it, I don’t even want to imagine what will happen to me.

My hands shake as I yank open the cabinet under the sink. Several spare rolls of toilet paper sit at the back of the cabinet, and I shove the phone into the middle of one roll, concealing it inside. I stack another roll on top, then close the cabinet and stand quickly, bracing my hands on the counter top just as the door swings open and Lucas barges in.

“What the hell?” I shriek. My racing heart is enough to make my expression believable, as if I can’t believe he just did that.

“You’re taking too fucking long.” He storms into the bathroom, filling the small room with his presence.

“I was just peeing—” I try to take a step back, getting him out of my personal space.

“Sure.”

He pokes around the bathroom, and I distract myself by washing my hands, thankful I found the hiding spot I did. I use every ounce of effort not to look down at the cabinet, flicking subtle glances at Lucas as he searches the bathroom. He checks all the obvious places, including under the lid of the toilet, but he doesn’t look that closely at the toilet paper rolls.

“Remind me to lock the door next time.” I shoot him a glare and skirt past him to leave the bathroom.

His reflexes are quick though. He catches hold of my arm before I make it more than a few steps into the bedroom, dragging me back easily. I try to wrench out of his grip, but he holds me tightly, pulling me closer to his body.

“What are you hiding, Grace?” He stares at me with narrowed eyes.

“I’m not hiding anything,” I protest, trying to pull away from him again.

“How do I know that?”

“Because it’s the fucking truth.” I strain harder against his tight grasp. “Now let me go.”

“Oh, and I should just take your word for it?” he counters. “Why should I trust you? I know what you’re capable of, even if you hide it all behind an innocent facade.”

“Fine.” I glare up at him. “Don’t fucking trust me. Why would any of you believe me about anything? Hale doesn’t believe a word I say, so why should I be surprised that you don’t either?”

He snorts. “Now you’re catchin’ on to how things work, princess.”

With those words, he tugs me closer to him. Then he begins to roughly pat down my body, sliding his hands over my arms, my waist, my hips. My breath catches in my throat as he moves them down my legs, starting at my upper thighs and sliding over my jeans, leaving trails of heat in their wake.

When he doesn’t find anything, he glances up at me suspiciously. His gaze flicks toward the bathroom again, and my heart nearly stops beating.

He’s going to search it again.

And this time, maybe he will find the phone.

“You don’t believe I’m not hiding something, Lucas?” I blurt, my voice raspy. “I’ll fucking prove it to you.”

You said it wouldn't happen again.

The helpless words reverberate through my mind, but they already feel like a lie. It's about survival at this point.

I have no other fucking choice.

I tug at the hem of my sweater, pulling it slowly over my neck and shoulders. My gaze leaves his for a second as I tug the sweater all the way off, and when I find his eyes again, they're blazing with heat.

My skin prickles with goose bumps, and my nipples harden, pressing against the thin fabric of my bra as my chest heaves with deep breaths. I deliberately shake out the sweater and drop it to the floor, showing him I'm not hiding anything. Reaching for my pants, I pop open the button and drag the zipper down.

"See?" I ask, pulling the waistband down to show my underwear.

"I still don't believe you." His voice drops to a lower timbre as he watches me. "Take off your pants."

I do as he says, pulling the pants down my thighs and stepping out of them on the floor. I feel his gaze roam up and down my body, settling at my breasts and the place between my thighs, lingering at the curve of my hip.

"I still don't fucking trust you, Grace," he murmurs, gaze dragging back to mine.

"Pat me down, then." I spread out my arms, trying to hide the tremor in my limbs. "There's nowhere else for me to hide anything."

That's not strictly true, and Lucas has been in a criminal organization long enough to know that just as well as I do.

My pulse accelerates as his hot stare burns a path down my skin, trailing toward the place at the apex of my thighs. He takes a step closer to me, hand covering my left hip as he tugs me closer to him. His palm drags along the softness of my skin, like skimming a hand over a flame, hoping not to get burned.

"I'm just gonna check." His other hand comes down on my right hip, caging me in. "I have to... be sure."

"Be my guest," I whisper. I wish the words sounded more confident, more dismissive. But the small hitch in my voice gives me away.

"Lift your hands up, Grace." He smiles as I do as he says, lifting my hands above my head. "Good girl."

He pats down my waist and hips, then slides his hands up my back and over my shoulders.

Fuck. Don't let it feel good. Don't let it feel like anything.

My body rocks toward him as his hands capture my waist from the back, dragging along the hipbone, ending at my sensitive navel. Snaking around my body, his touch skims down my thighs, my calves, then back up again, grasping my ass and tugging me closer. He's crouched in front of me, and I can feel the subtle warmth of his breath brush against my lower belly.

"See? I'm not hiding anything." My heart rattles in my chest as I look up at the ceiling, avoiding his gaze. I don't want him to catch the flutter of my eyelids or the quickening of my breath.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

He stands back up, and I find myself eye level with his lips. They're almost identical to his brother's, full and soft-looking, with a perfect curve at the top. I stare at them, unable to look away as they tilt upward in a slow smile.

"Are you satisfied?" I murmur, nearly dizzy from lack of oxygen. I don't think I've drawn a full breath since he first touched me.

The tips of his fingers skim across the band of my panties, and my toes curl into the carpet. I think he might plunge his hand inside and slip his fingers into my core any second—one of the last remaining places I could be smuggling something. But instead, he dips his touch lower, thumb brushing against my clit through the cotton of my panties as his palm presses into me.

"No," he murmurs. My breath catches as he rubs me again, arousal already soaking through my underwear. "I'm not."

LUCAS

MY HEAD SPINS. I feel like I'm fucking drunk. All I can think or say or feel is *Grace, Grace, Grace*.

She's everywhere—under my skin, her sweet scent clouding my senses and my mind, the *softness* of her body filling me with a deep craving that destroys rational thought.

I want to be inside her. I want to tell her how she controls me, how she possesses me. Body, mind, and soul. She'll never stop haunting me, holding power over me for fucking eternity.

She doesn't know how badly she's fucking with me right now.

I can feel her pussy aching for me despite the panties covering her sweet spot, already soaked with need. She pretends not to care, she pretends to be cool and aloof, but this is all the evidence I need right here. No matter how much she claims to hate me, her body will betray itself over and over again.

I know because she does the same to me.

Over and over and over again, I'm brought back to her. I fall at her knees like a fucking slave, ready to do anything for her, wanting to reclaim moments of our past that should be lost forever.

Holy fuck, I think as her soft exhale teases at my lips.

She's trying to stay still. I know she is. But her hips press against my touch in an effort to find more pressure, more friction. She tries to hide the panting of her breath, but she can't stop herself from rocking her pussy against my palm.

Jesus fucking Christ. She smells so damn sweet that I want to bury myself in her forever, in more ways than one; I want to pound into her at the same time I breathe in the scent at her neck, at the same time I bite down on her skin.

I want to get drunk on her.

I want to binge on her.

My thoughts are assaulted with a deep urge to dominate her. Claim her as my own. I want to leave my mark on her and make sure she knows who the fuck she belongs to. Make sure Zaid and Hale and Ciro know who the fuck owns her.

I drag my hands up her body and let my raging arousal press up against her softness, showing her exactly what she does to me. I want her to feel my length and picture it inside of her, in her hands, in her mouth.

My hands make quick work of the clasp at her back, slipping my thumb and finger underneath it before tugging her bra down her arms. Her breasts spill free, and I pull off my shirt, needing to feel her skin on my skin; wanting to lose myself in the spot between her breasts, take them in my mouth, worship them.

I walk her backward three steps and push her onto the bed before crawling up onto the mattress, reveling in the feel of her underneath me, the drag of her nipples over my chest. My cock aches like a motherfucker, like it's pissed as shit at me for the past six years. Furious that I let this gorgeous creature walk out of my life—never mind that I had no damn say in the matter.

As I drape my body over her, settling between her legs with only my pants and her thin scrap of underwear separating us, desperate need rages through me. I want to see her fall apart beneath me as I touch her, squirm against my body as—

Shit.

What the fuck am I doing?

Her breath comes in pants, her breasts straining against my chest, taunting me. They remind me of exactly what I want, and exactly what I can't fucking have.

As fast as I fell into this sea of lust, I snap out of it, realizing what I was just about to do. Realizing who I was about to betray.

Hale.

The syndicate.

Myself.

All for a woman who already betrayed all of us.

I tear my lips away from hers and rear back, staring down at Grace as I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth.

“Don’t fucking do that again,” I grate out, breathing hard. “I promise you, if you’re hiding something, you’re going to be punished for it.”

Grace stares up at me with a dazed look on her face, as if she just woke up and can’t decide if she was having a dream or a nightmare. Her cheeks are flushed, her nipples pink and hard, and her mouth hangs slightly open.

“I didn’t... do anything.” Her voice is husky, and the sound of it makes my traitorous cock twitch and strain against my pants.

Without warning, I flip her over onto her stomach. She yelps in shock as I press my weight into her body, pinning her to the mattress. Her ass isn’t any better against my hard dick, but I can’t fucking look at her face right now. I can’t take in the softness and confusion there. I can’t fucking stand it.

Her body quivers beneath mine, and I want to slip between her legs and into her dripping pussy, but I don’t.

I won’t. Ever.

“I’m not that stupid,” I breathe against her hair.

“Wh-what are you talking about?” Her voice is small. Breathless and muffled.

My nose brushes that sweet spot at the base of her neck, flooding my nostrils with her scent. My head spins, high on the feeling of her.

“I know what you tried to do with Zaid,” I say, ignoring the soft feel of her beneath me. Ignoring myself. “That shit isn’t going to work on me too. We’ve been given orders by our commander, and we follow those orders no matter what. You might not think men like us have honor, but we live by a fucking code. You understand that?”

She nods, the movement so slight it barely registers.

It takes every ounce of self-control I have to pull my body off of hers. I tug my shirt back over my head, then walk around the other side of the bed and pull ropes out of the nightstand drawer. She lifts her chin up, watching me like a cat.

“Get up,” I tell her, setting the binds aside. I cross the room and gather up her clothes, ignoring the wobble of her legs as she walks over to me. I

toss the clothes at her, more forcefully than is probably necessary. “Get dressed.”

She scrambles to tug on her clothing, refusing to look at me until she’s fully dressed. It’s just as fucking well. I’m hanging on by a goddamn thread, and if she pushes me again, if she tempts me one more time, that thread is likely to snap.

As soon as she closes the button on her jeans, I gesture for her to get back on the bed. My jaw clenches as I rein myself back in to where I need to be, remembering the role I need to play. Remembering who the fuck I am.

Once she’s settled on the mattress, I reach for the binds and immediately tie her arms up, pushing aside mental images of her in the same position.

Naked.

Begging for me.

Screaming my name.

She doesn’t say a single word, and her silence eats away at my heart like poison. She tries not to look at me, but when her gaze flicks to my face briefly, I see everything in her eyes that I never wanted to see.

Disappointment. Hurt. Betrayal.

I don’t know if she’s disappointed that we stopped, hurt by the fact that we ever even started, or betrayed by the fact that I’m tying her up now.

It really shouldn’t matter. I shouldn’t give a shit what she feels.

But it does. And I do.

“It won’t work, princess. Whatever you’re trying to pull.” I shake my head, clenching my hands into fists. “I had feelings for you once, but that doesn’t mean shit anymore. You can’t use it to manipulate me now.”

I watch the subtle shift in emotion cross her face—the way her eyes widen just slightly, her breath stilling in her chest. I have an overwhelming desire to close the space between us and claim her lips, disproving my words, but I’m not stupid.

I back away before it becomes too much. Turning away, I stride quickly to the door and close it behind me, turning the lock while I’m at it. We had locks fitted on the outside of the door in this room, but I suddenly wish the lock was on Grace’s side.

Not that it would matter.

It would take more than just a lock to keep me away.

GRACE

I DON'T KNOW what to do besides stare at the ceiling above me and try to process what just happened. Or rather, what happened an hour ago. Or two. Or twenty minutes. There's no fucking clock in here, and without a way to tell time, it starts to all blend into each other.

I had feelings for you once.

No matter how hard I try to push away his words, they play on repeat in my head. Over and over and over again, I hear him say the same words.

I had feelings for you once.

It wasn't just what he said, but the way he said it—there was complete truth behind his words. I could see it in his eyes, hear it in his tone. He didn't say those things just to mess with me or try to punish me somehow. He said it because he meant it.

Lucas has been thinking of me... all this time.

For the six years I spent away from the mafia, I told myself that I had left it all behind: the people, the lifestyle, the memories. It should've been easy for me to do, especially since growing up, half the time I didn't even know what was going on with my father. I knew his job wasn't like the jobs my friend's parents had, but I wasn't all that concerned about it. It was only after I turned ten or eleven, when I was leaving the true innocence of childhood behind, that I truly became a part of his world.

But those years, between ten and sixteen, were obviously more formative than I thought.

This world, this life, is in my blood more deeply than I realized.

Even after several years in Washington, when the memories of my past began to fade as I determinedly built a new future for myself, I would find myself slipping back in time occasionally. I would wake up in a sweat from dreams of my time with Lucas and Zaid or memories of a moment shared with Hale or Ciro.

How was I supposed to simply forget them? They were no small part of my life.

I cared about each of the four boys all that time ago, even though I never had the guts to say it out loud. Not even to the twins, not even after what happened between us.

It wasn't just attraction either, although I harbored secret crushes on all of them. It was deeper than that. Bigger. Something like *kinship*. Like love.

It's something I've worked hard to push away and bury deep, but now it's digging out of its grave, alive and ready to consume me whole.

Still... I always wanted to know.

Did they care about me the same way I cared about them?

And here I have my answer.

Lucas has been thinking about me for six years...

He said he cared.

My heart does another odd flip in my chest, confused by the revelation. It's six years too late, and yet it still finds a way to snake around my lungs and my chest and squeeze hard.

Lucas cared.

How the fuck is that supposed to make me feel?

My thoughts are already a twisted mess—I don't know what I'm supposed to say or think or do anymore, and this complicates things in a way I shouldn't let it.

I told myself it wouldn't happen again. I wasn't going to give away any more of my body than I already had, but my mind is getting caught up in the games that they play, the power dynamics. I know I can hold power over each and every one of them with just my body alone, but it still does no good to me.

Because I may hold power over them in those moments, but I hold no power over myself.

I constantly tell myself *this will be the last time*, but it never is. Half of me resists that idea, still wanting to fight it, but I know I can't. I know that

over and over again, I will betray myself.

And over and over again, they will win.

My arms strain against the binds, frustration overcoming me. I want out of this madhouse, this circus of fucked up emotions. Everything about it pushes me further and further into the same darkness my father and I tried so hard to run from.

They are my captors, not my friends, I remind myself, taking a deep breath. *Our pasts don't change anything.*

Screwing my eyes shut, I draw in a deep breath, forcing my lungs to take as much air as they can before slowly letting it out. I repeat that action twice more, and finally, my racing mind begins to slow.

As it does, I turn my thoughts to Brian and our conversation from earlier. Even though he was distressed and I was scared, hearing his voice again brought a small flicker of hope to me.

Will he come for me? Will he be able to find me?

I don't know if that ancient flip phone is traceable, and even if it is, I think we'd have to be on a call for him to trace it. But maybe that's not our only shot. He's law enforcement, and though I may be biased, one of the best I know. He takes his job more seriously than anyone else on his force, all the way down to paperwork and parking tickets. I know he'll do everything in his power to find me, no matter what it takes.

I spin our hurried conversation over and over in my mind, refusing to let myself focus on what happened immediately afterward. I needed to keep Lucas from searching the bathroom again, and I have to hope Brian will understand. That he'll forgive me for doing what I had to do to stay alive. To find my way back to him.

Is that the only reason you did it? A little voice whispers in the back of my mind, and I swallow down the painful lump in my throat, refusing to answer.

I doze for a while, exhaustion and stress making it hard to keep my eyes open.

But when the lock turns, the small sound brings me fully awake instantly, my body bracing for whatever may come.

The door opens, and Zaid steps into the room. His gaze runs over me quickly before he crosses to the side of the bed and leans over to tug on the ties at my wrists.

“Are we going somewhere?” I ask, confused. I thought Chicago was our final destination, but maybe I was wrong.

“You’re having dinner with us.” He makes quick work of the ropes, and my arms drop to my sides as he frees my wrists. “Lucas sent me.”

“Oh.”

I had feelings for you once. The words echo in my mind again.

I’ve never had dinner with the men before—one of them usually brings me a plate of something to the room and waits for me to finish eating before taking it away again. I’ve never been allowed to leave the room after I’ve been tied up.

Something has changed, and I wonder if it has anything to do with Lucas’s confession.

Sitting up, I rub my wrists, trying to bring circulation back into them. Next time I’m tied up I’ll have to hint to them not to put my arms so high up, although I already know they won’t listen. They’ll probably think it’s some trick I know to slip my binds, but that’s not true.

“Will Hale be pissed?” I ask. For some reason, I get the sense they haven’t told him about my invitation to dinner.

“Hale’s always pissed,” Zaid mutters, gesturing toward the door. “Come on.”

I follow him out of the room and down the same hall Lucas took me down earlier, taking a second to look at my surroundings.

Everything here screams *wealth*, but in an understated way. It’s more nicely decorated than I would’ve expected from four bachelors—especially ones who are soldiers and leaders in a mafia syndicate. I wouldn’t have thought they’d have the time to make their place look so nice.

But then again, image matters in the mafia. The projection of strength and power, always.

I try not to gawk as he leads me down the staircase and through a few more rooms, clearly familiar with the layout. He definitely lives here, and I’m almost positive the other three do too.

We pass through a sleek kitchen, then step into a large dining room. Lucas, Ciro, and Hale sit around a table in the center of the room, plates of food in front of them. The aroma of whatever it is they’re eating fills my senses, and my mouth waters. I didn’t realize until just now how hungry I am.

Conversation stops as three pairs of eyes turn to us, three different expressions on each of the men's faces.

"Who said you could bring her down here?" Hale frowns, fork paused halfway to his mouth.

The way he says *her* makes me wonder if he thinks he can reduce me to nothing by refusing to acknowledge I have a name, or even that I'm in the same room as him.

I want to hurl some insult back at him, but I press my lips together, deciding not to push my luck. I'm tired of eating on a bed, chewing each bite as long as possible so I don't have to be tied up again so soon. I just want to feel human for a few minutes, to eat at a fucking table like a regular person.

"I did." Zaid covers, glancing at his brother.

Hale arches a brow slightly, but doesn't say anything else. He doesn't welcome me to sit down or demand that Zaid take me back upstairs. He just goes back to his dinner, which I guess is the best outcome I could've hoped for.

Zaid pulls out a chair for me between him and Lucas, then walks into the kitchen for a second and comes back with an extra plate and silverware. He sets it down in front of me before taking his own seat at my side, grabbing one of the dishes and piling his plate high.

"Feel free to take what you want." He offers me a bowl of roasted potatoes, which I take.

Curiously, I look around at the other dishes—some sort of seared meat, cooked to aromatic perfection and glazed with spices; a pile of rolls with beautiful golden crusts, grilled vegetables. There's sauce I can't identify, but which smells heavenly, and red wine to go with it all.

As I fill my plate, I look around the table, wondering which of them is hiding secret cooking skills, because this certainly isn't take out. Hale watches me closely as I lift my fork to my mouth, taking a bite of potatoes.

Holy fuck.

I have to work to keep myself from moaning as the flavors fill my mouth, intoxicating herbs and spices. Maybe it's just because I haven't had much appetite for the past few days, but I've never tasted anything so good.

"Lucas and I made it," Zaid says, shooting me an amused look.

My gaze snaps up to meet his before flicking over to Lucas. “I never knew you could cook.”

Lucas shrugs, not looking up from his food. “A lot can change in six years.”

His tone is cool, but I brush it off, focusing instead on the food. Just because they invited me to dinner tonight, that doesn’t mean I can expect this to be a frequent occurrence. I want to make the most of it while it lasts.

I can tell that conversation certainly isn’t flowing as freely now that I’m here, but I don’t give a shit. They can discuss their syndicate business later. I’m enjoying my meal.

I glance up at the men every once in a while, watching them relax incrementally as they drink and eat. Even Hale seems to unclench his ass just slightly.

He’s always been uptight, even when I knew him before, so it’s been strange seeing his personality slowly come through. I can tell he’s careful with how much he’s drinking, but as he pours himself another glass, I can almost picture what it would be like to know him well enough that he acts comfortable around me.

Almost.

THE NEXT SEVERAL days pass in a strange sort of pattern, each minute seeming to both rush by and drag on interminably. I’m watched over constantly and spend most of my time tied to the bed, but every evening, Zaid comes upstairs and unties me to bring me down for dinner.

I hate that I’ve started to look forward to that part of the day, but I do. The food is delicious and well-cooked, and despite the fact that my stomach is still a constant knot of tension, I always manage to find my appetite. I don’t think the men eat breakfast or lunch together—they’re all too busy dealing with whatever syndicate business needs their attention—but the nightly gathering for dinner seems to be a tradition that’s existed since long before I came into the house.

There’s something nice about it, something almost *homey*, but I try not to let myself dwell on that thought. I’m already in a fucked-up mental space

about everything that's happened since my aborted wedding, and I don't need to be humanizing these men in my head.

They're monsters.

Kidnappers.

Violent criminals.

I have to remember that.

Nearly a week after my abduction, Zaid brings me downstairs as usual at around six o'clock. Dinner tonight is pasta with what tastes like a homemade sauce, and I do my best not to make small noises of appreciation as I chew my first bite.

I don't often speak much during these meals. The men have started to relax a little more each night, and I'm hoping that if I keep my mouth shut, they'll get sloppy and let some useful piece of information slip.

As I'm finishing up my second serving of pasta, a phone rings.

My thoughts instantly jump to the stolen phone hidden in the toilet paper roll, and my heart lurches in my chest. But Hale shifts, pulling his phone out of his pocket. The easy demeanor from seconds ago transitions into the same stiffness I'm used to as he answers the call, frowning.

"This is Hale." He listens for a second, then nods. "Yes, sir. We'll take care of it."

His gaze darts to me for a second as he speaks. Hale's always been the leader of this small group, but I can tell by his tone that he's talking to someone higher up in the syndicate than he is. There are only a few people that could be.

And by the look on his face, he's not pleased with whatever they're asking of him.

"Yes, she's with us," he continues.

I know he's talking about me. I catch a faint voice on the other side of the phone, but Hale is too far away for me to make out what the caller is saying. The conversation doesn't last much longer before he hangs up, shoving his phone back in his pocket.

"Your father?" Ciro questions, glancing over at his friend.

Hale nods, standing from the table. The semi-relaxed atmosphere from earlier is gone, swallowed up by whatever syndicate business needs their attention. "He's still out of town, and he needs us to take care of something."

A small bubble of relief rises up in my chest. If Damian Novak is away from Chicago, that explains why they haven't brought me to meet him yet. Maybe I'll have a few more days before the hammer falls.

"A shipment has been delayed, and apparently the normal fuckers who deal with this are also being... delayed." Hale snaps back into business mode in a second. "Zaid, Lucas, you're coming with me. Ciro, you're staying with Grace, because these two can't..."

He trails off, but I don't have to hear the words to know what he's thinking.

Zaid and Lucas can't be trusted with me.

I flush at the insinuation and bite my tongue, wanting to say, *neither can you, Hale*. I don't know if it's a good thing that I've made such an impression on my captors, but I'm not sorry it's Ciro who'll be left with me. My heart needs a fucking break, and I have a feeling the quiet man won't talk to me all night if he can help it.

"The shipment arrives in an hour, so we need to head out right now." Hale steps out of the dining room, voice echoing through the kitchen. "The rest of our team will be here in a second."

My head spins with possibilities at the thought of being alone in this huge house with just Ciro—if I can convince my captor not to tie me up, it could be the perfect opportunity to call Brian again.

We shuffle out of the dining room, but Ciro stops me from following after Zaid, Lucas, and Hale as they head deeper into the house.

"Wait here," he says, shaking his head slightly.

He doesn't say anything else as a few minutes pass and we wait for the other men to come back. I want to say something to fill the silence, but I know small talk isn't his specialty, and if I'm being honest, it's not mine either.

A moment later, the other men return, and all five of us move toward the front of the house. Hale opens the door for three new men, guys I don't recognize but who I'm sure belong to the Novak Syndicate. They step inside, sharing easy nods with Zaid and Lucas as they do.

"We'll take the van," Hale says, jerking his head in the direction of the garage.

The men all nod, and as Hale confers quietly with Zaid and Lucas about something, one of the new guys glances up, his gaze catching on me.

He grins, glancing from me to Ciro. “You got a date, man? That why you’re sittin’ this one out?”

“No,” Ciro says shortly.

“Okay.”

The man shrugs, obviously not thrown off by Ciro’s blunt tone. People in the syndicate must be used to it. But when the guy’s gaze shifts back to me, flirtatious interest gleams in his eyes.

He steps forward, holding out his hand. “Hey. I’m Eddie.”

The reaction in all four of my captors is instantaneous. Hale, Zaid, and Lucas break off their conversation, their backs stiffening, as Ciro takes a step forward, subtly inserting his body between me and Eddie.

“She’s not for you.”

There’s something almost dangerous in Ciro’s voice. A warning of some kind.

Eddie draws his hand back, his eyebrows shooting up as he glances from Ciro to the other men. The two newcomers look as lost as he does, but Hale, Zaid, and Lucas are still tense.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” Eddie laughs.

“No one touches Grace,” Hale says shortly.

The man’s expression changes with the mention of my name. His gaze whips back to me, and the flirtatious charm I saw a second ago is gone. “Grace?” His features harden. “Fuck—Grace *Weston*?”

No one answers, not even Hale, but that seems to be all the confirmation Eddie needs. He shakes his head, shooting a look at the dark-haired man beside me.

“Don’t worry, Ciro. I’m not interested. I wouldn’t want shit to do with the daughter of the man who betrayed Landon Novak.”

I recognize the name in an instant, but I don’t understand Eddie’s words. What did my father have to do with Landon Novak? Never once in the past six years has he mentioned that man’s name.

What the hell were you up to, Dad?

The thought sends a twinge of pain through me. If I was back home, dealing with funeral arrangements and seeing little signs of him everywhere, I’m sure I would be processing my father’s death differently. But with all the crazy shit I’ve gone through in the past few days,

sometimes it's hard to remember that my dad is really gone. That his death is real.

Behind Eddie, the other two newcomers are staring at me with suspicious, angry expressions. The entire atmosphere of the room has shifted, and my skin prickles uncomfortably.

"Good. Because she doesn't have shit to do with you," Ciro says, breaking the silence. He reaches behind him, his solid hand grasping mine in a soothing but commanding gesture.

Hale's gaze zeroes in on that small movement, a flicker of... *something* crossing his face.

Surprise, maybe?

It's gone before I can fully analyze it, and the stoic expression of a leader takes its place as he jerks his head toward the gathered men. "Let's roll out."

The tension breaks as they all slip into soldier mode, and the guy named Eddie nods deferentially to Hale as they stride out of the room.

Ciro's hand is still holding mine as I watch them go, trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

ZAID

THE VAN IS silent as we drive through the streets of Chicago, and for good reason. Each of us is pulling into the headspace we need to be in to successfully pull this job off. We don't know what we're walking into, and we need to be prepared for anything that might be thrown at us.

"I'm not getting ahold of Marlo," Lucas says, phone to his ear.

Marlo is the guy we're supposed to be getting the shipment from—drugs, money, guns, I'm not sure what it is this time. Hale probably knows, but I haven't asked. It's better not to be curious if it doesn't directly involve you, and we've all learned that the hard way.

"Did you try his other contact?" Hale asks, turning a corner.

"Yeah. I've been tryin' fuckin' everything." Lucas punches another number into his phone. He waits for an answer, but when none comes, he glances up. "So what do we do?"

"We show up to the drop site, Marlo or not," Eddie grunts from the back.

"For all we know, it could be a setup." Lucas cocks a brow as he shoots me a look.

That's a possibility I've considered too. Marlo knows we need the shipment, but he's also an uppity little fucker. It'd take a fool to try to cross us, but it's definitely happened before and not ended well... for them.

"We go through no matter what," Hale says, fingers clenching the wheel.

I make eye contact with him from the passenger seat, and the look he gives me makes me think he knows more than he's actually telling us.

"Hale," I murmur, keeping my voice low. "What's going on?"

"This isn't the first time shit like this has happened. Another shipment went missing a week ago. Someone is fucking with us. Challenging us."

My eyebrows shoot up. I'm not sure that's information that's generally known within the syndicate, but it's concerning as fuck. No wonder Hale's so tense. I almost wish *Ciro* could've come with us tonight too. We need a solid team, and although the three other men who've joined us are solid guys, I'd rather have *Ciro*. I trust him. Plus, he's deadly as hell in a shootout.

But we couldn't have left Grace alone—not even tied to the bed. I saw the way she darted for the door after Hale went after me at the first safe house, and I know she hasn't given up on the idea of escape.

So it's good that *Ciro* is with her.

I think she's gotten under his skin too, although it's hard to tell with that guy. But ever since his captivity, I don't think *Ciro* has ever voluntarily allowed someone to touch him, or even initiated touch. Even though none of us would say anything to him, we all noticed the way he reached for Grace tonight.

She probably has no idea how rare that is, but we do.

A small stab of jealousy pierces my chest, but I shove it down.

Goddammit. This is all such a fucking mess.

This isn't how I want things between us, if I'm honest. Between *any* of us, for that matter—I know my brother is struggling just as much as I am to get his mind right, even if we haven't talked about it.

I don't like the roles we're being forced to play: kidnapped and kidnappers. Captive and captors.

She deserves better than what we're giving her, but we have orders to follow. Rules. Stupid, fucked up rules that I've never doubted until now, just because of some girl from my past.

God, I hated the way she looked at me when I told her she was eating dinner with us tonight—like she was suspicious. Like she thought I was tricking her and walking her right into a trap, like I didn't care. As wrong as I know it is, I don't want it to be like that between us.

I want her to trust me, not fear me.

I had feelings for Grace once, and even though I would never admit it, some of those same feelings have been haunting me again, lingering.

Push them aside. Focus.

We pull off of the main roads, veering away from traffic and into the darkness of the back alleys on the west side of the city. We may live like men of class, but our business is fueled right off these dirty streets and the crimes that happen on them. I recognize the area we're heading into and estimate we have about five more minutes before we need to fully snap into business mode.

Focus.

The car pulls along the river bank; darkness casting a muddy shadow on the water. The Chicago River has never been clean, and it's the perfect backdrop for the deal that's about to go over. In this part of the city, no lights reflect off the surface of the water. Only a small, broken streetlamp at the mouth of an alley shows us where to go.

Hale parks the car and we step out, walking right into the roles we'll have to play. Lucas rolls his neck, checking the gun at his side, and I do the same.

The alley is dead quiet. Not a good sign. Hale, Lucas, Ciro, and I rarely pick up shipments anymore since we've moved up the mafia ladder, but I remember a time when we did this nearly every night—Marlo had a system, and if he was here, our shipment would be set up in front of us, ready for us to load.

"Marlo?" Hale's firm voice carries into the darkness. There's no answer. "Marlo?"

If Marlo's a no-show, he's going to be in big fucking trouble. You don't just mess with the syndicate's time without paying for it—a stupid mistake for someone like Marlo Benedetti, who's been connected to us for years. We're the reason his business stays afloat, and once you're in, you can't get out.

No matter how hard you try.

There's a shuffle from the end of the alley, and we're instantly alert, hands going to our weapons.

A short man steps out of the darkness and into the light of the street lamp, giving us a better look at him. I certainly don't recognize the guy—

fine suit, clean cut, maybe in his mid-forties. He has a cocky gait as he slowly makes his way toward us.

“Put your guns down, boys,” he says, grinning. “I am a friend, not a foe.”

None of us budge an inch, keeping our guns trained at his forehead. If this guy makes one wrong move, his body will be riddled with bullets before he has time to even think.

“Where’s Marlo?” Hale says, watching him. He’s the only one of us who hasn’t pulled his piece, but he’s got enough backup that he doesn’t need to.

“He’s not here at the moment.” The man smirks. “He’s gettin’ big, and I’m gettin’ in charge.”

“We made this deal with Marlo just a few days ago.” Hale’s voice is hard. “He can’t have gotten ‘big’ in such a short time. I’m not stupid.”

“Well, he did.”

The man reaches for his pocket, and I instinctively put my finger on the trigger of my gun, but he pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

“Want one?” he offers.

“Where’s the shipment?” Hale demands.

This guy is arrogant and likes to hear himself talk—exactly the type of person we have no patience for. With the attitude he has, he isn’t going to last long.

He shrugs, a flicker of flame illuminating his face as he lights the cigarette and takes a long drag. Then he shoves the pack and the lighter back in his pocket. “It’ll be here. Don’t get your fuckin’ panties in a bunch.”

“We agreed that the shipment would be waiting for us,” Hale growls. “Marlo’s already delayed it once. What the fuck is going on?”

We’re all getting pissed with the games this fucker is trying to play. This guy might not even be connected to Marlo, but it’s clear something is up, and Marlo isn’t going to live to see another day if he screwed us over.

The man cocks an eyebrow, grinning slyly at Hale. “You know what? Maybe the problem is you forgot to pay the rush fee. If you want your deliveries quicker, it’s gonna cost you.”

“If you really are who you say you are, Marlo isn’t going to be pleased.” Lucas steps forward, giving the man a pointed look. “We’ve had an

arrangement with him for years, and you're sticking your dirty-ass little paws into shit that doesn't concern you."

"Where the fuck is Marlo?" Hale repeats, growing impatient.

"I told you, he ain't here," the man drawls, his cigarette held between his lips as he speaks. "And here's the thing, this is the way we're gonna be dealin' from here on out. If you don't like that, you can shove your—"

Hale's hand moves so fast it's a blur in the darkness. Deftly, he plucks the cigarette from the guy's mouth and flips it around, jabbing the burning end into the man's left cheek.

The guy yells in pain, stumbling back several steps and drawing a gun from the waistband of his pants. "What the *fuck*, man?"

Even in the dim light, I can see the angry-looking burn mark on his face. There's a raw, blood-red circle on his cheek, and the scent of singed flesh hits my nostrils.

The guy is breathing hard, eyes wide and teeth bared as he braces one hand beneath the butt of his gun, his finger sliding over the trigger. All five of the men behind Hale, myself included, shift forward, ready to take this motherfucker out.

But Hale holds up a hand, stopping us with a gesture.

My whole body is tense, spring-loaded, as he cocks his head at the man. Sweat gleams on the guy's forehead, and his gaze shifts from Hale to the five of us, then back again. He doesn't look so goddamn smug now.

"Do you know what I think?" Hale asks. His voice sounds calm. Almost bored.

"No." The man squints at him, gun still pointed at Hale's chest. "What?"

"I don't think there even is a shipment. I think that warehouse is fucking empty," Hale takes a step forward. "Marlo is a fool to think that double-crossing us is going to get him more profit."

The man's gaze darts left and right. His over-exaggerated confidence vanishes completely as my commander approaches him.

"Do you know who I am?" Hale's voice drops, low and dangerous.

"Yeah. You're the motherfucker who put out a cigarette on my face!" The man raises his weapon slightly. "I should waste you right now, you son of a—"

"Then do it."

The guy blinks. “What?”

“You want to shoot me? Then fucking do it. You’re obviously trying to fuck us, which means you’re gunning to start a war with us, whether you meant for that to be the end result or not. So I’m gonna give you a chance to take the first shot.”

“Look, man, I don’t want—”

The guy licks his lips. He looks nervous as fuck now, like it’s finally sinking into his thick skull that he’s way out of his pay grade here.

Calmly, Hale spreads his arms open wide. “Shoot me.”

The man blanches. He looks down at the gun in his hand, then back at Hale, swallowing hard as he realizes he can’t get out of this.

Not even if he shoots Hale.

Especially not if he shoots him.

“See? You can’t do it.” Hale chuckles humorlessly. “Because you *do* know who I am.”

“I—” The guy shifts backward a step. Even in the dim light, I can see panic in his eyes. He came into this meeting with a lot of bluster and an overabundance of ego, and he’s gonna leave it with piss stains in his pants.

Honestly, it’s not the poor fucker’s fault. Marlo might be dead by now, and whoever’s been fucking with our shipments sent this guy as a messenger—and he doesn’t even know he’s a goddamn pawn.

“It would be stupid to shoot the son of Damian Novak, wouldn’t it?” Hale takes one more step toward the guy, leaning down to meet his eyes. “So whoever you’re working for, tell them that fucking with us is a bad business choice.”

“Please, I didn’t—”

“Who the hell set this up?” Hale demands. “They didn’t do you any fuckin’ favors by sending you here to meet us on your own. So give me a name. Who hired you?”

“I don’t—”

But we never get to hear whatever lame excuse this poor son of a bitch is about to give.

Sirens split the air as blue and red lights flood the area, lighting up the abandoned alley as three cop cars converge in the street behind us. Blinding lights momentarily block out everything else as loud voices cut through the air.

“Freeze! Get your hands up!”

“Put down your weapons!”

My body is moving before I even realize it, years of training and survival instincts cutting through my shock. I pivot in place as adrenaline surges through me.

Motherfucker.

We were set up.

GRACE

CIRO TAPS his fingers against the armrest of the chair that's been set against the wall in my room, staring off into space.

I wonder what it is he's thinking about—if he's thinking about me or something else. His eyes are just as distant when he thinks as they are when I'm talking to him, and my curiosity about his past rises again as I study him surreptitiously.

He doesn't seem to sense my gaze, so lost in his own little world. The drumming of his fingers is a consistent rhythm, a never changing pulse. The tattoo on his wrist creeps out from under his sleeve, teasing me, flexing with the movements of his skin. He's got roman numerals on his knuckles. I'm not sure what they mean, but judging by the way he unconsciously rubs them every couple minutes, I know they're important to him.

It doesn't matter, Grace. They're not important to you.

I pull my attention away from him, trying to focus on what to do. I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to try to call Brian again, but it's not looking good. After Hale, Zaid, Lucas, and their team left, Ciro brought me back up to the room like I expected him to, but he didn't tie me up. I'm not sure if it's because he trusts me more than the others do, or if he feels bad for what's happened to me.

He obviously doesn't trust me entirely, though, because Ciro hasn't left the room once since we came in. It's been well over an hour, and he's sitting in the same chair, his thoughts somewhere I don't belong. It's almost as if his body is here, but not his mind.

I wonder...

Is it possible he's so lost in his thoughts he wouldn't notice if I crept to the bathroom?

I flex my calves to move off the bed, but his head snaps to me before my foot even touches the floor. For a split second, his gaze has an almost animalistic look to it, wild, burning with something I don't understand.

And in a flash, it's gone.

Once again, he's completely impassive.

What happened to you, Ciro? My throat dips as I swallow hard.

"Can I ask you a question?" I ask quietly, breaking the silence.

He looks at me for a second, as if he's not sure why I would want to. But then he nods once, a quick dip of his head.

I tread carefully, remembering the last time I tried to push him for answers. That didn't end very well.

"Why do you have me here?"

I don't expect him to say anything, so when his deep voice fills the room, I'm surprised.

"We wanted your dad. We didn't get him."

Nothing in his voice betrays more than he wishes to tell, a skill I'm sure he's worked hard to master. He makes it seem like it wasn't that big of a deal that they didn't capture my father, like there's nothing suspicious about what happened. He reveals a truth to me, but that truth could mean nothing in the grand scheme of things.

"I didn't do anything..." My voice trails off. "You didn't need me."

"You were the closest person to him," Ciro says, watching me with unreadable eyes. "You might have information about him that would be helpful to us."

The person closest to him?

Once, I would've agreed with that statement. Now, I don't know.

I haven't had time to grieve my father like a normal daughter would get to. I haven't had time to process that he truly is gone. I didn't get to go to a funeral for him—fuck, I don't even know where his body is.

"I don't know anything." To my shame, my voice breaks slightly. "You know that."

"Yeah. I know," Ciro's tone softens, eyes flickering over my face. Assessing.

“Why did you want my dad?” I ask, trying to bury the feeling of tears prickling at the backs of my eyes.

Change the subject. Bring it back. I can’t think too hard about the emotions of everything, not until I’ve escaped. Not until I’m back home, and can let myself fall apart in Brian’s steadying embrace. I don’t have time for that right now. I don’t have the emotional capacity for the breadth of my grief and confusion.

Ciro hesitates, flexing in the chair. “He had debts to repay.”

“Debts with Landon?”

The words the man spoke downstairs are still fresh in my mind. Landon Novak is Hale’s uncle. He was Damian’s other half, his second-in-command for years, and he was not a man to be fucked with. If my dad crossed him...

“He ratted Landon out. Right before you both disappeared.”

“He—” I blink. “What?” I can’t think of anything to say.

Why would my father be so stupid?

What would have possessed him to betray his family like that? And I don’t just mean me or my mother, but the entire syndicate. They were his family, once. A part of his blood.

I always thought we left Chicago after my mother’s death because he didn’t want to risk losing me. I was all he had left, and he wanted to protect me from the violence inherent in this lifestyle.

But I never knew that his final act toward his old brotherhood was one of betrayal.

Ciro shrugs. “We’re trying to figure out if he was part of that other group at the church.”

“But they attacked us,” I choke out.

“Again, *if* he was part of the other group.” He shakes his head. “It’s unlikely. But maybe he pissed them off somehow. He was no stranger to double-crossing.”

My stomach tightens into a knot as I consider everything Ciro’s said. He told me more than I thought he would, but now that I know, I almost wish I could go back to *not* knowing. Not knowing anything means there’s no room for hurt, and now...

“I don’t know what to do, Ciro.” Panic creeps through my voice as thoughts spin wildly through my mind. “I don’t understand anything

anymore.”

Was my father still working with the mafia, even though he told me our days with them were over? Did he betray Hale’s family just to work with another group? It’s barely been a week since I was abducted, but in that short time, everything I thought I knew has been turned upside down. I didn’t think anything could knock me off balance anymore after everything I’ve been through... but I was wrong.

“I need you to go. Please.” Nausea rises up in me, making my skin clammy and cold. “I need to be alone, I need to think—”

And that’s the truth. I can’t do anything but think right now. If *Ciro* left me in this room alone, I know I wouldn’t be dashing to the bathroom to grab the phone, I’d be dashing the bathroom to bury my face in the toilet and heave up the contents of my stomach.

I don’t know why this feels like such a massive betrayal from my father. It’s just speculation. He could have been telling me the truth about running away, that we were really done with this world, this life. But he also could have been lying to me again, not trusting me to help him bear the burden of whatever lies he was carrying.

Whatever lies he carried to the grave.

“You can tie me up, it’s okay,” I say, my tone close to desperation. “Please.”

His jaw clenches, and he glances at the door. I don’t know why he’s debating. I’m not asking for much. I’m asking for him to do his job and leave me alone.

“Please.”

I never thought I would beg to be tied up, but fuck, I need to be alone.

“I don’t like seeing you tied up.” The rawness in his voice catches me off guard. “I don’t like seeing anyone tied up. Trapped.”

My throat dips as I watch him watch me. Darkness shadows his gray eyes, and I can practically *feel* the weight of his words settle on me. Something tells me that he knows what it’s like to be bound against your will.

A minute ago, all I wanted was to be alone. But seeing the expression on *Ciro*’s face, the look of understanding in his eyes, eases some of the tightness in my chest. He feels more like a kindred spirit than he ever has

before, and it's not something I would've expected from this silent, deadly man.

He carries the scars of pain I can't even fathom, and seeing him settled in the chair by the wall—seeing that despite everything he's been through, he's still here—gives me the strength to believe I'll find a way too.

I'll find a way to survive.

To heal.

Silence stretches between us for a long moment, and I don't say anything. I just wait, barely breathing. Finally, Ciro stands, the movement fluid and graceful.

"I was trapped for too long." He walks over to the foot of the bed and sits.

There are still several feet of space between us. I'm tempted to pat the empty spot on the mattress next to me, to silently encourage him to come closer, but my hand stays rooted to the blankets, my fingertips flexing.

"The feeling..." He shakes his head. "I would think I was gone, far away from it. It would all blend into itself. Different kinds of pain. All the same in the end."

He blinks slowly, as if it takes effort to keep his eyes focused on the wall of the bedroom—to keep himself from slipping fully into the past. Then he shifts slightly, moving a little closer as he looks down at the bed. I watch his hesitation before he leans forward and grasps my hand in his, sliding his fingers through mine.

It's the second touch he's initiated. The second time he's taken my hand.

Warmth instantly spreads up my arm and through my body, tapping at the edges of my hardened heart.

"I could get away sometimes, into my own mind. But then I would realize where I was. What was happening. The panic was almost worse than the pain." His hand squeezes mine tightly as the muscles of his throat tense.

"But you know what I've learned, Grace?" He says my name so differently than the way Hale spat it out that day in the woods.

He says it like a prayer.

Like a benediction.

My own throat tenses as I swallow. "What?"

He moves another few inches closer. I'm leaning toward him now, closing even more of the space between us, until we're less than a foot

apart.

“There are times when you need to be alone,” he says quietly, studying me in that way he has. The way that makes me feel like he’s seen all the way through me. Down to the very bones of who I am. “But there are other times when you need people. Even when you want to push them away.”

Time seems to stop for a split second, and I imagine I can feel the beating of his heart and mine between the palms of our hands. I’m lost in his eyes, in that dark blue-gray that’s so full of pain and secrets.

My body gets tangled up in a confusion of lust with the other men, but with Ciro, my heart changes its rhythm, wanting to be a steady beat to calm his demons.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

I was right, that very first night they took me captive. I knew it even then, although I didn’t know *why*.

Ciro is the most dangerous of all four of these men.

Because he can knock down the walls around my heart with a gentle tap.

I know I can’t fix him. He’s been through something so fucked up that he might never be completely whole again. But the small amount of trust he’s given me, the vulnerability he’s let me see, takes my heart and grips it, squeezing tightly. My lungs have lost the capacity for any small amount of air, and my head spins with the effort to stay steady.

His grasp on my hand loosens, but I’m not ready to give him up yet. I’m not ready for him to leave me in the headspace that I hate. That I know *he* hates. Because he’s right—I do need someone right now.

And as much as that applies to me, it applies even more to him.

The tips of my fingers slip down his palm and snag at the sleeve at his wrist, skin brushing skin. His eyelids flicker, and I watch the thrum of his pulse in his throat. He barely gives any other outward reaction, but the quickening of that beat tells me everything I need to know.

My hands shake, trembling as I hesitate. Skin hovers over skin, the warmth of him and the warmth of me mingling, a small radiating heat that mimics touch. His fingers flex at my wrists, another brush of temptation.

“Grace...”

He says my name differently this time.

It’s not a prayer now.

It's a plea.

I've promised myself—over and over and over—that I won't let this happen again. That I won't give in to the feelings that churn like the perfect ingredients to a bomb between me and these men.

But this feels different.

It's not just wild lust or need born of remembered feelings.

This is just *Ciro* and me, alone in this room. No past. No present. No masks.

And I want to touch him.

So I do.

Moving slowly, as if I'm afraid of startling a skittish animal, I reach for him. My touch is tender as my hands delicately settle on his chin and jaw, letting him adjust to that small touch before bringing his face toward mine.

His exhale becomes my inhale. Everything around us seems to pulse with the rhythm of our bodies, as if I can hear our heartbeats in the air.

Then I let my lips find his, closing the last bit of space between us.

I feel his shudder of breath against my mouth as his body goes tense, and I brace myself for him to push me away. To stand up and stride from the room, giving me what I *thought* I wanted.

I don't want that anymore. In this moment, I think I might die if he leaves. Might die if I lose the barely-there press of his lips against mine. The warm, woodsy scent of him.

But maybe he feels the same desperate need for contact, because instead of pushing, he pulls me closer. His hands are unsteady as they grasp my waist, a light touch that burns all the way through me.

Ciro's kiss is slow and burning as we both rise up onto our knees. I haven't even tasted his tongue, but I'm nearly drunk on his lips. When I fall back onto the bed, he follows, hovering over me.

He murmurs my name against my mouth, a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine. Even as my touches grow more needy, desperate, messy, he's careful not to let his body touch mine more than where our lips are connected. His hands have moved away from my waist, bracing him up on the mattress, and although I want to feel his full weight on me, I know he can't do that. Something holds him back.

His nose brushes my nose as he kisses the corner of my mouth, my jaw, my earlobe, but he gets pulled back up to my mouth, unable to stay away.

“You taste like honey, Grace.”

His rough whisper sends a flare of desire through me, and I forgot everything else as my hands skim down his neck and wrap around his shoulders, pulling him closer to me—an instant mistake.

His body flinches against mine as he freezes, eyes going to that distant place I hate.

I blink up at him, my heart pounding as guilt rages through me.

Fuck. I ruined it. I hurt him without even meaning to.

His gaze is fixed, his pupils wide. It’s like he’s looking at me but not seeing me, slowly being dragged back into the darkness by the demons of his past... and I can’t let that happen.

“Ciro,” I whisper, releasing my grip and resting my hands on the mattress beside my head. I’m no longer touching him at all, although our body heat still intertwines between us. “Stay with me. Please. I don’t want to be alone.”

He blinks, his brows drawing together as he focuses on me for a second. He licks his lips, as if he can still taste me on them. Then he nods once, the movement jerky and strained.

He rolls away from me on the bed, lying next to me. The six inches between us feels like a cavern of years apart, of changed lives, but I don’t move any closer.

This is all he can give right now.

All he can take.

And it will have to be enough.

Neither one of us speaks again, and as we lie in silence, I let the steady sound of his breath lull me away from my tormented thoughts.

Just before sleep pulls me under, I feel the gentle brush of his hand against mine, light as a butterfly’s wing.

GRACE

A SOUND outside the room wakes me.

It's dark, and only a few small slivers of light pour into the bedroom from around the edges of the curtain. I roll over unconsciously, still half-asleep as I seek out the comfort and warmth of *Ciro's* body.

But the space next to me on the bed is empty.

I'm not sure how long I was asleep, but he must've slipped away sometime after I passed out. I'm filled with a sudden ache, wishing he trusted me enough to stay with me. I doubt he even let himself fall asleep like I did.

Vigilant. Always vigilant. On guard against any threat.

Another muffled *crash* that seems to come from down the hallway jerks me from my thoughts. And as I come fully awake, it hits me suddenly that I just *rolled over*.

I'm not bound. I'm alone, and my hands are untied.

I don't know why the hell *Ciro* left me like this. Maybe he just couldn't bear to touch me again, even to tie my restraints? Maybe he felt pity for me?

The why doesn't really matter. The only important thing is that I'm not tied up.

Another noise outside makes me glance up, my heart jumping in my chest. It's a muffled voice, heavy and full of emotion.

Hale's voice.

I stare at the bedroom door and then the one that leads to the bathroom, knowing there shouldn't be any debate in my mind. I'm unbound and unwatched—there should be no thought in my mind other than *call Brian and escape*.

But for some reason, I hesitate.

My bare feet hit the soft carpet as I peel the covers back and stand. Then I creep toward the bedroom door and test the handle.

Unlocked.

The hallway is empty, but the sound of a deep voice muttering harsh words draws me down the hall to another door. It's cracked open a few inches, and a soft glow emanates from the room. Chewing on my lip, I peer through the crack, my heartbeat nearly drowning out another string of indecipherable words from inside the room.

It's definitely Hale.

His back faces me, hands perched on the desk. His head hangs between his shoulders, fingers tapping the desk in frustration. He mutters a curse under his breath, reaching for the bottle of whiskey on his desk.

He's drunk.

"Never fucking prepared," he murmurs, and I freeze as I finally pick out the words he's saying. He's not talking to me, but I can't move. "Never enough fucking information."

I dig my heels into the carpet, trying not to make a sound. My curiosity has been piqued; it's always been my worst fucking weakness.

"Dead..." He takes a drink and then slams the bottle back on the desk. "Set up... No one sets me up. No one *kills* one of my men—"

His words are slurred, but no longer indecipherable. I catch them loud and clear, and I can guess what he's talking about. Whatever shipment they were dealing with tonight clearly didn't go well—someone died. My thoughts instantly go to Lucas and Zaid, and an inexplicable rush of fear fills me. But I get the feeling that Hale's anger would become a tempest that might consume the whole world if that happened. If one of his blood-brothers died.

A sudden rush of nerves runs through me. This isn't Hale's bedroom, it's an office, but still. It's his private space. I'm not supposed to be here—I'm supposed to be tied to a bed behind a locked door, tucked away where I'll never escape.

If he finds me snooping in the hallway, he'll be fucking furious.

Shaking my head at my own stupidity, I glance back toward the bedroom I came from. I need to try to find some clue about where I am, some useful information I can give Brian. I can't waste this precious opportunity.

I step away from the cracked door, careful not to move in front of the small opening between the door and the frame. Not to let Hale see me.

But as I turn to retrace my steps down the corridor, the door whips open suddenly.

My heart jumps into my throat, nearly choking me with fear as Hale's hand closes around my wrist, yanking me inside the room. He slams the door shut behind me and shoves me up against it.

"Grace." The single word falls on me like a fucking anvil. I swear I see my life flash before my eyes. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I heard a noise." I lift my chin, putting on an air of reckless confidence I don't feel. Whiskey hovers on his breath, sweet and smoky.

"That's not why you're here."

He laughs humorlessly, taking a step back. My fingers grapple for the door handle, but before I can even turn it, his palm strikes the heavy wood next to my head with a thud. Blocking me. Penning me in. "Don't move," he growls.

Deep. Raspy.

I open my mouth to say something else, but I don't have any excuses. There's no fucking reason I should be here. Not in this room. Not in this house.

I don't belong in this world anymore, I think desperately, willing the words to feel true.

"Did you come here to taunt me?" He cocks his head, one corner of his lip tilting up in a feral smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"No."

"To tempt me?"

"No."

"To ruin me?" His voice drops, his eyes narrowing.

"Looks like you're doing a pretty good fucking job of that yourself," I say pointedly, glancing past him at the whiskey on the desk. "What are you—half a bottle in by now?"

He glares at me, then presses away from the door and stalks back to the desk, picking up the bottle of amber liquid and downing another shot as if to prove a point. He lets out a hissing breath as the whiskey burns down his throat, and for a second, I see the raw pain in his cobalt eyes.

Then his gaze shifts back to me, and suspicion fills his features instead.

"Come here," he commands.

"No."

"Is that all you can fucking say?"

"No."

"Then say something else."

"What happened tonight?" I shouldn't care, but the words slip past my lips anyway. I've seen Hale furious before, seen him tower with rage. But I've never seen him look so... broken.

He seems almost as startled by my question as I am. His eyebrows jerk upward slightly, then he narrows his eyes again, forcing his bleary gaze to focus. "A man died. A good man. One who should've lived."

"I'm sorry."

He makes a noise low in his throat, but I can't tell what it means. He lifts the bottle again, but sets it down without drinking. Then he jerks his chin at me. "Come here."

This time, my feet move against my will, responding to the undeniable command in his voice. Or maybe they're just responding to the powerful force that seems to constantly be dragging me and this man closer and closer together like two magnets.

I stop a short distance away from him, and he inclines his head toward the bottle as if offering me a drink. When I shake my head, he reaches out and catches my wrist again, pulling me closer to him. His skin feels like it's on fire, like the alcohol in his system is literally burning him up from the inside out.

"Tell me what you know, Grace," he whispers.

Jesus. This again?

"I don't know anything." Irritation bubbles up in my chest, but even more powerful is the feeling of exhaustion. Will we go round and round forever, refusing to trust each other? Refusing to believe each other? "I've already told you that."

"Then why are you here?"

He repeats the question, but I don't really think it's meant for me this time. I'm not sure who he's asking. The universe? Himself?

We're standing so close together that I can see the shadow of stubble on his jaw, the splotch of red on his neck—dried blood, maybe?—and the way his pupils seem to expand as he watches me.

"I'm here because you brought me here," I say. "Because you stole me."

In a flash, Hale moves. He spins us around so quickly I barely register what's going on until my ass hits the solid desk behind me, almost hard enough to bruise. He steps between my legs, pressing into me with his solid body, stroking the smoldering flame inside of me. My body reacts in fear-filled pleasure, no longer sure what the fuck it wants.

No longer sure who it belongs to.

Me? Or Hale?

"Why aren't you running, Grace?" he growls, his face inches away from mine. "Why aren't you fighting? Why aren't you pushing me away?"

"I don't know."

They're the truest words I've ever spoken, and they burn as they slip past my lips.

He grins. It's the reckless grin of a feral animal, and it makes him look sexy as fuck. Dangerous. Wild.

He's never liked the answer *I don't know* from me before, but maybe this time he knows exactly what it means.

Maybe he hears the words I can't say. The ones I *won't* say.

"Then fight me, Grace." His breath fans over my mouth, and there's a dare in his words. "Fuck me over like you always do."

A sudden wave of sadness washes over me, taking me by surprise. Hale might truly never believe me when I tell him this, but I'm beginning to realize I didn't know my father at all.

"I didn't fuck you over, Hale." I shake my head, meeting his cobalt gaze. "My father did. He betrayed the syndicate. He betrayed *me*."

Hale blinks, drawing back a little to take in my face as his eyes track over my features. I know he can see the heartbreak in them, if he didn't already hear it in my words.

His expression softens, an answering pain flickering over his own face, and I can't tell if it's pain *for* me or *because* of me—or maybe both.

Then he does something he's never done in the entire time I've known him, not in this life or the one from my past.

He kisses me.

His head dips as his lips find mine, sweet and almost chaste. I can taste the alcohol on his breath, and I wonder fleetingly if that's what brought about this unexpected softness, what broke through the barrier around his heart. Not me, but a half-bottle of expensive whiskey.

Before I have time to get lost in that question, Hale wraps his arms more tightly around me, deepening the kiss and stealing every thought from my head. His tongue sweeps the seam of my lips, then he nips at my bottom lip gently, as if he'll try both requesting entry and demanding it.

The moment I open my mouth, his tongue slides in, tasting me, plunging deeper. His strong grip keeps me pinned to his body as we lose ourselves in the sparring of our tongues and the bruising pressure of our lips.

He's never kissed me before. He's made me come twice, he's thrown me over the edge of ecstasy, but he's never, ever done this.

It's better than everything else.

It lights up my body in a way even the toe-curling orgasms didn't, flooding my veins with a flush of warmth that makes me feel like I'm on fire.

"Fuck, Grace," he mutters into my mouth, barely pulling back from the kiss enough to form the words. "You taste so fucking good."

So does he. He tastes like whiskey and pain, like conflict and desire, and I let my tongue war with his as I try to absorb more of him.

When he finally pulls his lips away from mine, my mouth feels swollen and tingly. He trails his tongue over the line of my jaw and down my neck, biting and nipping at my skin occasionally, sending shocks of pleasure shooting through me.

I'm wearing one of the simple t-shirts and pairs of jeans the men provided for me, and Hale fumbles with the hem of my tee as he pulls it up and over my breasts. I let go of him long enough to lift my arms over my head, and when the basic white bra I'm wearing comes into view, Hale freezes for a moment.

He seems lost. Transfixed.

His breath picks up, and I watch his chest rise and fall faster, conscious that my own lungs are working faster to match his.

When he unclasps my bra and tugs it off my arms, something about the sight of me topless seems to flip a switch inside him. He shifts his focus to my pants and panties, unzipping them and pulling them down in fast, jerky motions as I shift my weight to help him.

As soon as he has them free of my legs, he steps back and looks at me, biting his lip as he stares at me sitting naked on his desk.

Still staring, still devouring me with his gaze, he reaches out and skates his palm over the curve of my waist. Goose bumps rise up in the wake of his touch, and my nipples pull into tight buds as my breath hitches.

Hale pulls his shirt over his head, revealing the smooth expanse of muscle hidden underneath, and I grip the desk to keep from reaching for him. I want to explore his body the way he's exploring mine. To touch him everywhere. To map the planes of his solid form and memorize this version of Hale.

The one who doesn't seem to hate me at all.

I want to do all of that, but before I can give in and extend a hand toward him, he crouches in front of me.

His large hands grasp my hips, tugging me closer to the edge of the desk as his broad shoulders spread my legs wider apart.

Then he pauses for a moment, his upper body between my thighs, his breath ghosting over the skin of my lower half.

And he just... looks.

With no hint of embarrassment, he stares at the most intimate part of me, something beyond hunger in his gaze.

It's something almost like *ownership*, and it makes a sharp jolt of fear cut through the haze of desire inside me.

It's too much.

I can't let him look at me like that.

I can't let him see me like that.

So I stop him from looking.

My fingers thread through his hair, and I drag him closer until his face is buried between my thighs. His body jerks in surprise, but then his hands wrap around my thighs, spreading me even more as he follows my silent urging and attacks my clit with his mouth.

Lips. Teeth. Tongue. They all work together, ramping me up higher and higher as fierce pleasure edges on pain. I throw my head back, my back arching as my legs dangle from his grip, palms flat on the desk behind me as I try to keep from collapsing in a writhing heap.

“Fuck, Grace.” His words are slightly slurred, muffled by my skin as he laps at my clit. “I knew you’d be like this. I knew it.”

I don’t ask him what that means, or how many times he’s thought about this. I don’t think I could handle the answers to either of those questions right now. But my fingernails claw at the desk as a fresh wave of sensation barrels through me, my pussy clenching and convulsing around nothing as I come apart.

“Keep coming. Come for me, baby.”

With a growl, Hale surges to his feet, unzipping his pants and shoving them down to free his heavy cock. He wraps one arm around my lower back as the other hand guides his thick length to my entrance, and then he pitches his hips forward, driving into my still fluttering channel.

The feel of him filling me up, filling the desperate, empty ache inside me, sends me hurtling over the edge of another orgasm, and I whimper loudly as he slams in all the way to the hilt. His balls slap against my ass, and I clutch at his shoulders, wrapping my legs around him as I sob out my release.

“So fucking good.” He grinds against me, pressing his cock even deeper inside and putting perfect friction on my clit, drawing the orgasm out into rippling waves of pleasure.

Only when he hears my breath change does he begin to thrust, pistoning his hips hard and fast as if he’s already used up every last scrap of restraint he had.

Keeping his arms wrapped around me, he lowers me back onto the desk, draping his upper body over mine as he pounds into me.

He’s big, and the stretch of my inner walls is almost painful. But I dig my heels into his ass, urging him deeper anyway.

I need it.

I need him.

Both the gentle side and the brutal side. The entire contradictory, fucked-up package that is Hale Novak. All of it.

In this moment, it doesn't feel like there's anything else in the world I need more.

His thrusts shorten, growing choppy and quick as he claims my lips in another deep kiss. His cock swells inside me, hard as fucking steel as he growls into my mouth.

"Come with me, Grace. I want to feel you fucking come."

"I—can't." My breath is coming so fast I almost can't get the words out. He's slamming into me so hard the whole desk is shaking beneath us.

"Yes you can, baby. Do it. Come for me. Right. Now."

His last words are punctuated by two more hard strokes, and when I feel him explode inside me, his cock pulsing as he spills his release, my worn out and exhausted body somehow finds a way to obey his command.

A third orgasm burns through me, flaring hot and bright like gasoline under a lit match. My arms and legs clench tightly around him, and I bury my face in his neck as he does the same to me, our bodies wrapping around each other as if we're both seeking comfort from the storm.

A haven in a dangerous world.

GRACE

HALE MUTTERS A SOFT “FUCK” into my neck, his hips pushing against mine again.

My chest and his chest collide with every labored breath. I feel lightheaded, wrapped in a sated satisfaction that I know will fade once we let reality settle between us.

But still, he tries to make it last, drawing this moment out as long as possible.

I bury my face in his shoulder, swallowing hard, breathing in whiskey and a hint of cloves along with something distinctly *Hale*.

I can't believe I just did that.

That we just did that.

Because I wasn't the only one who broke down, the only one who broke a vow made to myself. Hale's been trying to resist this thing between us just as much as I have. I know I don't fit inside his orderly plans, his rigid insistence that he can control everything.

Turns out, whatever this is, it's something neither of us can control.

Hell, he's still buried inside of me and already some part of my body is crying out for more, a deep craving rising inside me again.

We've only taken the edge off our tension, not banished it completely.

He shifts slightly, adjusting his weight on top of me, and I wrap my legs tighter around his waist.

In a second, I'll think. In a second, I'll let guilt invade my body. But for just one more second, I want to stay in this place where I feel... good.

I'm aware of every part of Hale that touches me, my sensitive body burning against his skin. The rage from earlier has worn off, leaving nothing but the rawness of his ache, the vulnerability of his desire, and my body wants to explore and push the limits of him, wondering how far we could take it.

He finally lifts his head with a quiet groan. His mouth searches for mine, capturing it in a soft kiss that lingers, too tender and sweet for my confused heart. He steadies himself with his hands on my waist, pulling me closer like he's searching for some way to fuse our bodies together, and I find the bare skin of his back, dragging my fingernails over it until he groans again.

When he kisses me like this, I can almost imagine there's true feeling beneath his cold exterior, and a small part of me wants more of it—more of this—even though I know this is as much of Hale as I'll ever get.

He's your enemy.

Your captor.

And you're a fucking cheater and a liar.

My hands freeze on his warm body, my heart jerking in my chest as guilt finally floods in like a tidal wave. I had a chance tonight to call Brian. To let him know I'm still alive, to try to give him some information that could help him find me.

And what did I do instead?

I fucked one of my captors on a desk.

And I enjoyed it.

"Let me go." My fingernails dig into his back with more force as my body goes stiff. "Let me up. I can't—"

I feel the exact moment tension floods his body too, and I fucking hate it. I hate that I miss the softness I just saw and felt in him. I hate that I can even tell the difference.

How the fuck did we get here?

How did this happen?

We hate each other. I hate him for stealing me away from my life, for destroying my perfect future, and he hates me for what my father did. Since the man himself is no longer here to bear the brunt of Hale's fury, I've become the stand-in, the proxy.

And no matter what just happened between us, that hasn't changed.

Hale pulls out of me and steps back, his dick still wet with our combined arousal. I feel the absence of him instantly, my body going cold without the warmth of his skin.

I turn my head away as he tucks himself back into his pants and straightens out his clothes, tugging his shirt back on. I focus on the long rows of heavy bookshelves that line the walls instead of him—instead of my body.

When he's done, I slide off the desk and crouch down quickly to gather my clothes, pulling them on so fast I almost rip the shirt.

"Let's go." Hale's voice is blunt. Emotionless.

The second I'm dressed, he grabs my elbow in his large hand, leading me out of the office and down the hall toward my room. I tug out of his grasp, not wanting to be led anywhere by him. Not wanting to be escorted like a fucking prisoner. Bitterness is already overtaking me; any warmth or passion from moments ago is gone.

He doesn't grab my elbow again. He turns around only for a second to make sure I'm following and not trying to flee, then resumes walking toward my room.

I watch the muscles of his back shift as we make our way down the hall, and I'm surprised when one of his steps wobbles. He grumbles a curse under his breath.

"Are you all right?" I ask. He's still drunk, but I don't think that catch in his gait was from the whiskey.

"Why wouldn't I be all right?" He doesn't look at me, but his voice still has the same hard edge as before.

I should be glad he's shutting down, that he's back to the cold, bitter Hale it's so easy to hate. But for some reason, the dead tone in his voice hurts.

"Your leg," I clarify. "Is it okay?"

He stops walking for a second, looking down at his leg as if he forgot he had one until just now. He doesn't seem to understand what I'm saying, so I continue.

"You were limping," I say. "Or... dragging it a little more. Like you hurt it."

I've never noticed it before, or if I did, I didn't think anything of it. But tonight, he's very clearly shifting more of his weight onto his right leg, as if

it hurts to put too much pressure or weight on the other limb.

“Lots of things have changed since you left.” He resumes walking, and his stride looks more even now, as if my question reminded him to hide his weakness. “Don’t fucking worry about me.”

Before I can say anything else, he shoves my bedroom door open.

He drags me over to the bed, reaching for the ties with sloppy hands. I willingly lift my wrists to him as he tries to hold them and tie the ropes at the same time, his eyes glassy and distant. Irritated.

I wish for a second that I meant something more to him, that he wouldn’t just tie me up after he’s used me and thrown me away, but the churning nausea in my stomach reminds me that it’s better this way. If we don’t care about each other, then what happened between us doesn’t mean anything.

We were just two desperate bodies colliding. Our souls, our *hearts*, had nothing to do with it.

Hale’s right about one thing, I think. Lots of things have changed.

After he finishes securing the bonds, Hale lingers in the doorway, watching me with hooded eyes. For a second, I imagine seeing what he’s seeing—me, tied to the bed, arms above my head and cheeks still flushed. Then I close my eyes, as if that can block out the image from my mind.

I keep them shut until I hear the soft click of the door closing.

He’s gone.

Leaving me behind. As always.

I want to scream as the outside world is once again closed off to me, rocked by the feelings of confusion within me. I don’t understand anything anymore. I don’t understand what my dad was doing, why I’m attracted to all of these men from my past, why I’m letting myself stumble again and again. It’s like I’m *trying* to be self-destructive, *trying* to hurt myself more and more and more.

I hate that a small part of me felt so right, so *complete* with Hale.

I despise it.

I want to scream *fuck you* at the top of my lungs, arms straining against Hale’s ties in protest.

My lips stay pressed together, but I allow myself to give in to my frustration and rage for one moment, jerking and straining against the ropes

that bind me to the headboard. The stitches in my side ache as my abs contract, and I pull so hard it feels like I might dislocate my arms.

But then—

My wrists move.

The tight ropes wrapped around them shift a little, and my left hand slides partway out of the bind.

My breath suspends in my lungs, my eyes flying wide in the darkness.

“Holy fuck,” I whisper.

Hale was too drunk or too distracted by his own inner turmoil to do as good of a job as he normally does.

If I can... just... wriggle...

I press my fingers together, trying to make my hand as small as possible as I tug against the ropes. It feels like my bones are being smashed together, but when I feel my hand begin to slide out of the binds, I keep pulling, ignoring the pain.

Then it’s free.

Immediately, I sit up and begin working on the other tie with my free hand. I struggle with this one—even having one hand already unbound to help, it’s not as easy. But I keep working at untying the sloppy knot, and after a few minutes that feel like an hour, I finally twist my second hand free.

Thank god for a shootout, I think darkly. Without that and the half-bottle of whiskey clouding Hale’s judgment, it could have taken months for something like this to happen.

I scramble to the bathroom, then crouch by the cabinet and open it quickly. I grab the ancient flip phone with shaking hands and dial Brian’s number, noticing as I do that the battery icon is almost completely empty.

Please don’t die on me. Please...

He picks up after a single ring.

“Grace?”

“Brian?” My voice trembles, relief and guilt expanding in my chest. “Brian, thank god. I don’t know—”

“I’m here, Grace,” he says in a rush, interrupting me. “In Chicago. I’m coming to get you. I flew into the city the moment you called last time. I didn’t want to call you in case the phone rang and put you into more trouble.”

“You’re here?” My heart races. He’s so close. So close.

“Yes. I’ve done some digging into the Novak Syndicate.” His voice is strained. “They’re the real fucking deal, Grace. These guys don’t mess around. What the hell do they want with you?”

“I don’t know.” I don’t have time to go into everything with him now; it’s too fucking complicated to explain in a single sentence. There’s a lot I’ll have to tell him once I get out of here, but first, I have to focus on getting out alive.

“I haven’t involved local police,” Brian goes on, not pressing me for an answer. I can hear the urgency in his tone too, and I know he’s as aware as I am that if I don’t get out soon, I may never get out. “I didn’t know if I could trust them, and I didn’t want to risk putting you in danger. Do you know where you are?”

“No.” I shake my head, tears burning my eyes as I glance furtively toward the door again. “I haven’t been let outside. My curtains are always closed.”

“Fuck.”

“But I have to get out, Brian,” I say hurriedly. “Tonight. Right now. I might not ever get another chance. It doesn’t matter where I am. I’ll get out, and then I’ll call you, okay? You can come find me.”

“Grace, no. You can’t do that on your own—”

“I have to.” I shake my head, even though I know he can’t see me. “It’s the only way. I’ll be okay. I promise.”

There’s a long pause, and I can imagine Brian running through every possible scenario, trying to come up with another option. But there isn’t one. I know there isn’t.

He must reach the same conclusion I have, because he makes a low, angry sound in his throat. “Fine. But be fucking safe.” He drags in a breath. “Please.”

“I will.” My heart thuds heavily against my ribs. “I’ll call you in a little bit. Hopefully.”

I hang up the phone, adrenaline racing through me as I glance at the battery indicator again. The phone hasn’t been plugged in since I stole it, and I don’t know how much power it still has left.

I need to get out now while everyone is distracted. Hale is one of my biggest problems, the most suspicious of me, and he’s drunk—probably

passed out right now. So I just need to find a way of getting out without alerting any of the other men.

“Think, Grace, think,” I mutter, stuffing the phone into my pocket.

Mafia security is vicious, which means I can’t just walk out the front door. But there has to be another way out, one that will get me out of the house without drawing attention—at least, not right away.

I slip out of the bathroom and quickly put on the pair of shoes the men gave me, then slowly turn the bedroom door handle. The hall is empty, and I don’t hear any noises coming from Hale’s office. Thank fuck.

The house is big, so I try to stick to a route I know, creeping down the wide staircase I’ve been led up and down a few times now. If I can get downstairs and find an unlocked window, that might be my best bet, but I need to avoid the domestic areas the men frequent most often—living spaces, kitchen, anywhere with bedrooms. It’s late, which means hopefully most of them will be asleep.

Please, god, let my luck hold.

I take the rest of the steps at a dangerously fast pace, trying to stay quiet. Bolting down the main hallway, I carefully open doors, looking for a ground-floor window that might be open. When I walk into a room that’s outfitted with a wet bar and a large open area in the middle, my gaze locks on the unfastened window on the far wall. It’s barely ajar, but hopefully the fact that it’s not closed and locked means opening it farther won’t trip any alarm.

It slides open easily as I lift it, and my entire body itches with tension as I wait for an alarm to blare or for one of the men to storm in and snatch me up.

But nothing happens.

Almost faint with relief, I slide through the opening before dropping onto the soft earth outside.

There’s still no sound of an alarm, but the silence feels ominous. For all I know, I’ve tripped some internal alert by breaching the window, and the men are pounding down the stairs even now. I need to run as fast as I fucking can. Even if they don’t have a backup security team or don’t see the alerts for a few hours, I’d be a fool to linger.

To my surprise, the yard isn’t fenced or gated like I expected. Maybe it would’ve looked too damn conspicuous if they’d barricaded themselves

behind a massive wall. I dart around the side of the house and down the long driveway, and the second my feet hit the sidewalk, I break into a full-out sprint.

It's been days since I've done more than lie on a bed with my arms tied over my head or sit crammed between two large men in the back of a car, and my body screams in protest as I run. My stitches throb, and my shoulders ache as I pump my arms, trying to go faster, *faster*.

Darkened houses fly past me, but I barely look at them. I know they're big like the men's house, which means they must live in a fairly expensive neighborhood, but I don't pay any more attention than that until my lungs begin to burn so badly that I have to stop.

Wheezing and gasping, I dig my phone out of my pocket. The battery icon is flashing a warning, and for a moment, my heart seizes up in terror. I don't even dare try to call Brian, for fear of sucking up the last bit of juice just connecting the call. Instead, I text him a single sentence, telling him the cross streets where I'm currently standing.

The phone makes a little noise as the text is delivered, and then the screen goes black.

A wave of panic rises up, threatening to drown me, but I clutch the dead phone to my chest and crouch down beneath a thick set of shrubs that borders a property on the corner.

I can't be more than a couple miles from the men's house. But I have to hope that I'm far enough away for Brian to reach me before they track me down.

Assuming he actually got my text.

My grip tightens on the flip phone, my fingers squeezing it so hard I'm afraid I might crack it. I hunker down as low as I can, hiding in the shadows as I wait.

I stare out at the dark street with wild eyes, scanning the horizon for any sign of someone following me. Even the smallest noises make me jump as I imagine Hale or one of the other men—or all four of them—coming after me, pissed and angry.

Please, Brian. Please hurry.

I crouch under the bush for so long that my joints grow stiff and the sweat cools on my body.

Then a low purr meets my ears, and a second later, headlights flash, illuminating me in the darkness. They're so bright I can't see the driver, but I can make out the shape of a dark sedan. My heart claws its way into my throat, and I brace myself to run or fight. Is it my captors? Have they found me?

But then the driver stumbles out of the car, racing toward me.

"Grace!" Brian's voice washes over me.

Within seconds, he pulls my body into his, wrapping every inch of me in a protective hold that no one can take away from me. Not even the goddamn mafia.

He found me. He came for me.

"Oh my god, Brian," I sob into his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I keep repeating those words over and over, wishing I didn't have so fucking much to be sorry for. Wishing I hadn't made so many mistakes.

He grasps me tight to his body as all of my emotions come flooding forth, making my body shake. I bury my face into his neck as he picks me up and carries me back to the car, his grip firm and strong.

"It doesn't matter. Nothing else matters. I'm here, Grace," he says softly. "You're safe."

GRACE

I WISH we could get on a fucking plane and get the hell out of Chicago immediately, but it's three o'clock in the morning, and the next flight isn't for several hours. Besides, I have no ID on me, something we'll have to sort out once I can think straight.

Brian takes me back to the hotel room he's been staying at since he arrived in the city, and even though my entire body feels anxious and too-alert, I recognize that we're as safe here as we'd be anywhere else if the men come for me.

Will they come for me?

Will they try to get me back?

I try to shove aside worries about them showing up at the hotel and getting into a shootout with Brian.

When I mentioned my fear to him in the car, he told me not to worry, that I'm safe now. The hotel is booked under an assumed name and paid for with a prepaid card, so it'd be hard to trace it to him. He's taken all the precautions he could to stay low profile and off the Novak's Syndicate's radar.

My body can't seem to stop shaking, though, no matter how reassuring his words were. I know he must be burning with a million questions, but the first thing he did when we got back to the hotel was encourage me to take a shower.

It's the first one I've taken in several days. I was allowed to shower after we arrived at the men's house in Chicago, but Zaid stayed in the room

with me the entire time, making my skin burn. I probably could've asked for another shower later, but I was in no hurry to repeat that experience.

The hotel soap smells like ylang ylang, a scent I normally dislike. But I scrub it all over my body anyway, using my nails as well as my fingertips, as if I'm trying to slough off the entire top layer of my skin.

To shed it like a snake and leave the person I've been for the past week behind in a heap.

As I step out of the hot shower and into the steamy bathroom, I feel like I'm in a dream. I want to savor every second until I wake up, even though I know that everything around me is real. By some miracle, I escaped.

I'm safe.

So why don't I feel more relieved?

There's a soft knock at the door, followed by Brian's voice.

"I have your clothes," he says softly. I stare at the door, not knowing what to do. Basic things have become difficult, strange. "May I come in?"

I wrap one of the hotel robes tightly around me before giving him a yes and opening the door for him. Outside of the hotel bathroom stands the man I was about to marry, so different than the men I've spent the past week cooped up with. There's nothing dark and mysterious about him—just simple, boyish charm. There's a goodness and earnestness in him that seems so pure, so innocent, so foreign to me now.

He steps into the steamy room and hands me a fresh pair of pants and a faded long-sleeve tee. *My clothes.* He must've brought them from my apartment, in case he actually managed to find me.

Tears burn my eyes, and I swallow hard as I take them. "Thank you."

He hesitates for a second, and I do too. Waiting for him to leave the bathroom. In our old life back in Washington, I would've just dropped the robe and changed in front of him—we've seen each other naked plenty of times before. But the thought of standing bared in front of him right now feels too vulnerable, as if he'll see every place that I've been touched.

He'll see the stitches.

He'll see the marks.

Brian seems to get the idea, although I'm sure he doesn't know exactly what I'm thinking. What I'm feeling.

"Right..." He clears his throat, scratching the back of his neck. "I'll get out of your way."

The door closes behind him, and I slip into the clothes quickly, overwhelmed by the familiar smell of *Brian* on my clothes—they must've been packed in the same suitcase.

The fabric smells of cologne and his favorite laundry detergent, but for some reason, the scent isn't comforting like I want it to be. Instead, nausea rolls through my stomach, consuming me.

I clench the side of the sink until my hands hurt, trying to calm my breath, trying to push away the strange panic that's rising up in me. Every second that I was held captive by the men I used to know, I *wanted* to be rescued, to go back to this. To be with Brian. But now, as I catch sight of the blurry woman reflected in the foggy mirror, I don't know who she is.

Wide-eyed and confused, she's overwhelmed by everything that's swelling inside her.

Guilt.

Betrayal.

Regret.

"Stop it, Grace," I mutter to myself, clenching the counter harder. Trying to push my feelings out of my body by force. "Stop it right now. It's nothing but shock. Bullshit emotions that aren't real. You're traumatized."

Then why do I feel guilty for leaving them behind?

Why do I feel like I've betrayed them by leaving them?

I don't actually feel like that, do I? Do I really feel like I owe them something? That I belong with them?

"You're crazy." I glare at my reflection. "Absolutely fucking crazy."

It'll get better when I'm away from Chicago. I know it. People talk about Stockholm syndrome, and I know what the term means, but now I *viscerally* understand it. It's fucked up, but a small part of me feels lost without the four men who have dominated my life, emotions, and body ever since they kidnapped me.

I take a deep breath and step out of the bathroom. The carpet is scratchy underneath my feet, and Brian doesn't seem to hear me as I flick off the bathroom fan and walk toward him. He's sitting on the edge of the bed with his laptop on his lap, staring at the screen with his brows pulled tightly together.

What are you thinking about?

My feet still as I watch him. Wondering.

How are we going to get back to normal after this? Is he going to want to have sex with me tonight? Should I *want* to have sex with him tonight? Such simple yet loaded questions flood me, consume me. The hotel room is quiet, but my head is so loud, I feel like someone is screaming at me.

“My hands won’t stop shaking,” I murmur, and he looks up at me quickly.

The look in his eyes tells me that things aren’t going to be *normal* yet. I’m not sure what caused it, what he was thinking about that made him look so... conflicted, but I try to smile gently. Lifting my hands up, I show them to him.

He grasps them suddenly, pulling them to his chest. I’m forced to sit next to him, thigh against his thigh, skin against his skin.

“We’ll leave soon,” he tells me. “I’ll get everything sorted out. I don’t want to stay in Chicago any longer than we have to. We need to get you somewhere safe, away from here.”

“Okay.”

I turn away, unable to look him in the eye. He’s been patient with me up to this point, but I know he’s going to want the full story soon. The cop in him is going to demand it.

So before he has to press for answers, I begin speaking. In a low voice, I sketch out the basic chain of events that began the day my dad and I left this city and ended with Brian finding me crouched beneath a bush in a wealthy Chicago neighborhood.

There are lots of things I gloss over, and several things I don’t tell him about at all. I will, but I need a night to collect myself first, to sort out the mess of emotions inside my heart.

And then I’ll throw myself at his feet and beg for fucking forgiveness. I’ll tell him everything, and if he still wants to make things work, I’ll do whatever it takes to fix things between us.

Brian listens silently while I speak, then begins to prod me with gentle questions. He asks why the men targeted my dad, and if the other group who attacked the church were mafia too. He asks if I have any idea what either group might want with me.

“No.” I shake my head. My throat is scratchy from speaking, even though I’ve kept my explanation as brief as possible. “All I know is that

Hale blamed my dad for ratting out Landon Novak. They took me in his place after he died.”

“Did they hurt you, Grace?” Brian says suddenly, turning my chin to make me look at him. He gives me a penetrating stare, a deep frown on his face.

My lips feel dry, and I dart my tongue out to wet them before I answer. “No.”

It’s not entirely true. I’m an emotional fucking wreck. But they bandaged my wounds, stitched me up, and took care of me. They never dragged me into some dingy room and tortured me.

“Did they touch you?”

His voice is hard and a little dispassionate, as if he’s forcing himself to ask the question even though he doesn’t really want to hear the answer.

I don’t want to give it. But I can’t outright lie to him—not after everything he went through to rescue me. An omission is one thing, but a lie would break whatever fragile bond we have left. He deserves the truth, no matter how much it hurts both of us.

“Yes.”

My cheeks burn, and I can feel the flush creeping over my skin as dozens of memories flood my mind. Yes, they touched me. Each one of them, even Ciro.

And no matter how sick or insane it makes me, I craved every touch.

I sought every touch.

Needed every touch.

Hell, I initiated more than one of them. I could lie to myself and pretend it was all against my will, but the words ring false even in my head.

“Grace...” Brian’s expression changes as he watches my face, disbelief and something like hurt spreading over his features. “Do you... do you have feelings for any of them?”

Please don’t ask me that. Please.

The clock ticks incessantly in the background as I fight for words.

“No.” The word scrapes against my vocal chords. I repeat it again, willing it with every fiber of my being to be true. “No. I don’t.”

Brian stares at me intently for a moment, his eyes bouncing between mine. Then he leans back a little, his posture relaxing as he draws a deep

breath, voice softening. “You’re lying. Good,” he says with a small smile. “That makes things a little easier for me.”

“For you?”

I turn to face him more fully, shaking my head in confusion.

What is he talking about?

He pats my knee, giving a little shrug. “I still feel bad about this. But knowing you fucked them? Knowing you fucking *fell* for them?” A hard edge enters his voice. “I feel less bad.”

“What are you—”

I gasp as he moves like lightning, wrapping an arm around my neck as he grabs something from the bed behind him.

A sharp needle pricks my skin before I have time to protest or pull away from his strong hold, and I yelp in shock and pain. But that’s the only sound I make. The sedative rushes through my system in a torrent, stealing thought.

Stealing strength.

Stealing consciousness.

My vision blurs and darkens, just a single word left echoing in my mind.

Betrayed.

HALE

I CAN'T SLEEP.

Doesn't matter how fucking drunk I still am.

I toss and turn on the bed, aching for sleep. Aching for Grace. Burning for her.

For a few fucking seconds back there on my desk, while I was buried to the hilt inside her, her walls still fluttering around my cock, everything felt *right*. For just a little while, the hollow ache in my chest was filled. My heart beat normally. I felt at peace.

It was a strange sensation, almost totally foreign to me. But it was a welcome one. Something I'd been dying for without even realizing it, like a man in a desert who's convinced he can live by drinking sand.

Grace is water.

Pure. Perfect.

"I'm a fucking dick," I mutter into the darkness, punching my pillow.

I hate the feeling of *feeling*. I don't know what to do with the tightness in my chest when I see her, the way my breath catches. I don't know what to do with the odd flicker of warmth in my heart when she speaks, so I channel it into cold wrath. I push her away again and again when all I want is to pull her closer.

When I realized what had happened—that I'd let myself finally break down and take her, that I'd fucked her on my desk—I closed myself off. Because that's what I do when emotions and feelings start to creep in. I shut that shit down. I shove them away before they can fuck with my heart.

But it didn't work that way with Grace. The more I tried to hate her, the softer my feelings toward her became. I've been a goddamn mess since we brought her back to Chicago, and I can see the effect my actions have had on her.

I've hurt her.

Because I'm an asshole. A moody fucking asshole.

I've fucked up big time, not because of what happened between us, but because of how I handled it. The moment I felt her start to pull away, I threw all my damn walls back up too. I tried to tell myself it was just a quick fuck, that it didn't mean anything.

But that's a goddamn lie.

I pushed her away like it was nothing to me. Like I don't give a shit. Then I marched her back to her room and tied her to the fucking bed.

My eyes close as I grit my teeth, remembering how she didn't even struggle. Remembering the sight of her lying there on the bed, arms above her head, and the overwhelming urge I felt to turn around and go back to her. To crawl up on the mattress beside her and pull her into my arms.

But I left.

I just fucking left her there.

As the son of Damian Novak and his only heir, I've been party to some fucked up shit in my life. Sometimes bad things have to happen for our organization to thrive. But I've never truly felt like a monster until now.

"And now she hates you," I mutter, speaking the truth into existence. Needing to feel the words come out of my mouth, needing to feel the full weight of my own self-loathing. "For good fucking reason."

I do care.

I care way too fucking much.

I've tried to push her away. To turn off the thoughts and the craving, but none of it works. For as long as I've known her, even back when we were kids, Grace always had a way of getting under my skin, fucking with my heart and mind. I don't know why I thought I could take her captive and still have the strength to resist her. I don't know why I let myself touch her and convinced myself that one time would be enough.

Every time I let myself take what I want, I hurt her. I don't know why I thought this time could be any different.

No. That's bullshit. I shake my groggy head, running a hand through my hair. *I can make it different this time.*

I don't have to let my damn pride get in the way like it does every time. She's tied up in the bedroom now, probably hating my guts for being such a dick. But I can fix things.

I need to tell her how I feel. Beg for fucking forgiveness.

Swinging my legs over the bed, I stand up, my body heavy. I instantly feel nauseous from the alcohol that's slowly working its way through my system. I'm not in great shape to be doing much of anything, but I need to go before I convince myself that I can't.

Shuffling down the hallway, I try not to put weight on my bad leg.

"Are you okay?"

I hide my injury well. Most people in the syndicate don't even know about it, and the pain is mostly under control. But when I get drunk or stressed, the damaged muscles and nerves in my left leg flare up, making the limp more pronounced. I took two bullets in a shootout a few years ago, and although my recovery impressed the doctors, my leg will never be one hundred percent again.

And Grace noticed.

More than that, she worried about me.

Despite what a royal prick I've been, despite what an asshole I was tonight, I could still hear concern in her voice as she asked about my leg.

And how did I react?

Stupid anger.

I take a breath, steadying myself at the threshold of her door. I don't have time to think up something to say, but that's never really been how I operate anyway. I just need to tell her *I'm sorry*. I just need to fix things.

There's a desperate pang in my heart as I open the door and look at the bed.

The empty bed.

My gaze tracks from the discarded ropes on the mattress to the open bathroom door, and something cold settles in the pit of my stomach. I don't even have to ransack the room to confirm it. I already know.

Grace is fucking gone.

EVEN THOUGH I woke them up in the middle of the night, Zaid, Lucas, and Ciro are completely alert as we all gather in the living room downstairs. They know that a full night of rest is rare in our line of work, and if they're awake right now, they're not going to bed for at least another twelve hours.

Ciro watches me with an intensity that makes me want to shrink away, a gaze that says *I know*. I can hide emotions really well, but I've never been able to hide anything from him. Ever.

"Grace is gone." I cut to the chase, not bothering to preface it with anything else.

"What the fuck?" Lucas's voice is loud as he glances toward the stairs—toward the second floor room where Grace should be. "How?"

I glance at Ciro's cool disappointment, swallowing hard. I want to default to my usual confident arrogance, but the hollow guilt inside my chest won't let me.

"What happened?" Zaid steps closer, his green eyes burning. Tension fills his body, and I know it has nothing to do with the possibility of failing in our mission. It's about losing Grace. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know." I lick my lips, dragging my phone out of my pocket. The sight of the empty bed sobered me up real fuckin' quick, although my temples still pound with a massive headache. I press a button and glance down at the screen. "I was with her around midnight. I must've fucked up her binds, because she managed to slip them. So she's been gone for three hours."

"Shit." Zaid curses, but I can feel Lucas's gaze on me. Probably wondering why I had to redo her binds at midnight. Why she wasn't tied up already.

It's a question I could put to Ciro too. How the fuck did Grace end up wandering the halls by herself before I found her outside my office? There's enough blame to go around, but I'll take most of it. I'm the leader, so it falls on my fucking shoulders. I should've handled all of this better.

But I know why we've all gotten sloppier with her restraints these past couple days. Because we all, whether we've wanted to admit it or not, hate the idea of keeping her captive more and more.

Not because we don't want her here.

But because we wish she was here for a different reason.

And now she isn't even here at all.

She's got a three hour head start, and Grace is strong, determined, and resourceful. We can ransack the house looking for clues as to how she escaped, and that might give us something to go on as we try to track her down. But it's a long shot that we'll find her again—especially since she'll know we're coming this time.

Doesn't fucking mean I'm not gonna try though.

"Zaid. Lucas." I jerk my chin at them. "Take the first floor. Do a sweep for anything she might've left behind, any sign of where she's been. Ciro and I will head upstairs and do the same thing. We need to start somewhere."

"I've got a better place to start." Ciro speaks up for the first time, shaking his head as he meets my gaze.

His reaction to hearing about Grace's disappearance was more muted than the twins', but that's just how Ciro is. He processes things in his own way, on his own terms. Now, his slate-gray eyes burn with intensity as he stares at me, his spine stiff and straight.

"Yeah? What?" I trust him like a brother, so if he's got a suggestion, I want to hear it.

He glances at Zaid and Lucas, then back to me. "I put a tracker in her shoe. We can use that."

My eyebrows shoot up, shock warring with hope as my mind grapples with which emotion to experience first. "You did? I never gave the order for that. It's not protocol with a prisoner."

"I know." He pushes his sleeves up, revealing the dark ink on his forearms. "But I did it anyway."

"Why?"

Something passes over his face. An expression I haven't seen him wear in years—maybe longer. He holds my gaze as he says, "Because I didn't want to lose her."

GRACE

CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNS in a wave of nausea that I fight to keep down, followed by terror. My body is scrunched up in a fetal position, but not because I'm tied up—I physically can't move because of the close walls and ceiling surrounding me.

The whole room seems to lurch and I hit my head on something, my forehead burning with friction.

Carpet?

It slowly dawns on me that the stop and go of movement and the confined space isn't actually a room, but the trunk of a car. I've been shoved carelessly in, hands tied expertly behind my back.

By Brian.

A flood of memories assault my still-fuzzy brain, and I fight for calm, letting the initial wave of panic pass—the knowing that I can't get out, that I'm trapped. The adrenaline and emotions of escaping from the men's house comes rushing back, followed by Brian's betrayal. It all hits me like a damn wrecking ball, and I'm overwhelmed with fear and confusion.

But I can't wallow in those emotions.

They won't help me right now.

Focus, Grace, focus.

I've escaped once before. I can escape again. I need confidence right now, because terror isn't going to keep me alive.

I pull against the ropes binding my wrists together, testing the strength of the ties. Brian's tied me well, but his mistake dawns on me in an instant.

I may have filled him in on some of my past earlier tonight, but there are still plenty of things he doesn't know about me.

He doesn't know that tying my arms behind my back isn't an effective way of holding me.

When I was nine, I broke my arm. It's not that uncommon for a young kid who likes to rough and tumble to break a bone, but mine was pretty bad. Though it healed well, it left the shoulder socket permanently weakened. Hale and Ciro were there when I fell out of the tree and broke my arm, and it's a story Zaid and Lucas heard more than once during our teenage years. All four of those men know my history well enough to know never to bind me like this.

One... two... three.

With a trained motion I've only had to use a few times in my life, I hold my breath and jerk my shoulder, popping it out of the socket.

Holy.

Fuck!

Pain shoots through my shoulder and down my arm, and I bite down hard on my lower lip to suppress a scream. But now my shoulder is loose in the socket, leaving me with the ability to work my hands under my butt and legs. I flinch at the pain, but once I get my bound hands in front of me, I'm able to use my teeth on the heavy ropes at my wrists.

I work as quickly as I can, biting and tugging at the ropes. My wrists were raw and chafed already, and they burn with every bit of friction as I slowly work them free of the binds.

But I do it.

My teeth hurt from biting so hard on the ropes, and my breath is coming in short gasps by the time I manage to free myself. I give myself another quick countdown before popping my shoulder back into place, swearing under my breath.

Motherfucker.

It hurts like a bitch to do, and I have to wait for the wave of pain to ease, but I'm suddenly thankful for a hot summer day thirteen years ago when little me wanted to prove Hale wrong. Wanted to climb higher than him, or any of the boys.

I pant for air in the claustrophobic trunk, catching my breath and contemplating my next move. Before I come up with anything solid, the car

rolls to a slow stop. A second later, the engine shuts off, and I know I only have seconds to make a choice.

I can't tell what's going on outside of the trunk, but I hear a door thud closed as Brian gets out. Gravel crunches beneath heavy feet. His phone rings, and then his muffled voice filters through the lid of the trunk.

"What?" There's a pause. "Yeah. I got her. No trouble at all. She ran right into my arms." There's amusement in his tone, and it makes my stomach turn over. "I'm about to—" He pauses again. "Yeah. What? Goddammit. Yeah, fine."

His footsteps shuffle over the gravel again, and his voice grows muffled. I shift in the trunk, straining to keep listening, but I'm only able to pick up small snippets.

"...need to get out of here before..."

"...drop payment at the..."

"...at Calvin's..."

A few moments later, he stops speaking altogether, and his footsteps return, growing louder as they near the car. He sticks a key into the trunk, and my pulse leaps. I quickly position myself to make it look like I'm still bound, clasping my hands behind my back.

When the door lifts and his face is revealed, I blink up at him. I'm groggy and sluggish, but I try to appear even more out of it than I am, fluttering my eyelashes weakly as I tilt my head to meet his gaze.

He smirks, reaching down to pull me out of the car.

A mistake.

The second my feet hit the ground, I ram my fist into his face, catching him off guard. Momentarily stunned, he falls back, loosening his grip on me. I'm tempted to hit him again, but I know if we get into a serious physical altercation, I'll lose eventually. I need to take advantage of his disorientation.

As he shakes his head, trying to regain his balance, I make a mad dash for freedom.

But he's too fucking fast.

Within seconds, he's on my heels, yanking my arms behind my back again. I jerk my head backward and feel the crown of my head connect with his face.

“Fuck!” He grunts, and I stomp hard on his insole, scraping my foot down his shin. He lets out another curse, and I run again, breath fogging in the cool air as I sprint for dear fucking life.

Adrenaline, fear, and panic make a mad cocktail of emotions fueling my dash. I don’t even know where I am, or where I’m going, but I weave back and forth slightly as I run all-out, trying to make myself a harder target for a bullet to hit.

But mid-stride, something wraps around my midsection, and I fall, chest slamming against the hard ground. The wounds in my side scream in protest as Brian flips me over and straddles me, pinning me with the weight of his body.

“Don’t move, Grace,” he pants, pulling the gun out of his waist. He smiles, pressing the barrel of the gun between my breasts, digging the hard metal into my skin through my shirt. “Jesus, you really are a pain in the ass. I wanted this to be simple. Easy.”

“Brian, please.” My voice is a breathless gasp. A wheeze. There’s a wild look in his eyes I’ve never seen before. *Nothing* about this man is familiar right now. “I’ll go with you, I promise—”

“Too fucking late, Grace.” He shakes his head, his lips pulling back. “I made a deal. I can’t back out of it now.” His eyes narrow. “Tell me, did you fuck all of them? Or just the leader? Did you spread your—”

Pop!

The shot comes from above me, and I scream in shock as a bullet slams into Brian’s chest. His body absorbs the impact, eyes going wide, face slackening. The blood pours from his chest onto my body, a sickeningly familiar sensation of warm liquid seeping through my clothes and onto my skin.

Then he topples over sideways, his limp body still half straddling me.

Two pairs of strong arms grasp me, pulling me away from Brian’s large form, and my heart stutters in my chest as familiar scents tease my nostrils.

Vanilla and citrus. *Zaid and Lucas*. They each hold an arm, helping me stand on legs that can barely support my weight.

“You...” I can’t speak. I don’t understand. “How...”

They saved me.

They could have let Brian kill me, but they saved me.

They came for me..

“Grace.” Hale's voice is drawn with emotion as he pulls me into his arms, pressing his body against mine as Ciro stands close by.

I go stiff, wait for the hateful words, the harsh rebukes. But they never come. He holds me in his arms until my heart finally begins to slow its desperate, terrified rhythm. His thick arms wrap tightly around my body, pinning me to his strong frame.

But for once, it doesn't feel like a cage.

It feels like a shield.

His whispered words send a warm wave of comfort through my body, a sensation I never thought I would ever feel around him.

“I am so, so sorry...”

GRACE

CIRO LIFTS me up onto the bathroom counter, planting me firmly onto the marble top. As always, I can't read his expression—I don't know if he's upset with me, annoyed, or relieved that I'm not dead. And just as much as I can't read him, I can't even begin to sort through how I feel about the night's events.

Brian tried to kill me.

Brian betrayed me.

I actively fight the thoughts, battling against them in an effort to keep my head straight. I focus on Ciro moving around the bathroom, pulling out a first aid kit from one of the drawers and walking back to me, thighs resting hesitantly between my legs.

"I just have to..."

"It's fine." I open my legs a little, giving him room to work.

He stands close as he examines my body, making note of the places where blood has dried and where it's still dripping down my arms. I'm lucky that the few scrapes I received during the scuffle of getting away from Brian are all I have as markers of what happened, not something worse.

Like a bullet in my chest.

"I'll get you some ice for your shoulder when we're done," Ciro says absently.

My focus snaps back to him. "How did you... know?"

“How else could you have gotten out?” he muses, touching the place between my shoulder and neck lightly. The pain has dulled to a low, steady throb.

His eyes are absent, as if he’s recalling the same memory I have of when I broke it, and I have the sudden urge to bury my face in his neck and pull him tight, letting his body protect me from everything.

I know that he can’t actually protect me, not when he has others to answer to, but having him for just a few moments would at least help distract me from the spray of bullets that are my thoughts.

Everything is so fucking complicated.

“Could you...” He gestures toward my shirt. “I need to check on your stitches. It looks like you tore them.”

Sure enough, when I glance down at my shirt, there’s a dark stain of blood where my still healing gunshot wounds are. I barely even thought about it during the fight, but now the area pulsates with a heavy ache—not to mention the other cuts and bruises on my body.

I lift up my shirt for him, and he examines the wound before applying a disinfectant that stings like a bitch, making me hiss in pain.

He flinches. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

He applies gentle pressure to the area, focused on his task.

Not on me.

Never on me.

Just get through this now, I tell myself, ignoring the aching stab of loneliness and confusion. And deal with the rest later.

“What... happened?” I’m not sure I even want to know. “How did you find me?”

“Brian wasn’t a good guy.”

As if I hadn’t already figured that out.

“He was a dirty cop, then...” I say.

“To say the least.” He avoids my gaze, focusing on applying a new bandage to my side.

I narrow my eyes. “What aren’t you telling me, Ciro?”

“We think he might be the one who sold you out.” He rips a bandage, hard, hands trembling. He’s angry—not angry at me, angry *for* me. “Either

he was working directly with the other group, whoever the fuck they are, or he told them where to find you and your dad.”

Of course.

Of course he was lying to me too—just like my dad. If everyone I trusted most turned out to be dirty, to be lying and withholding things from me, who can I trust in my life? Is there anyone left that I can turn to?

Ciro’s eyes are level with mine, and I look at the hard line of his brow, the way it softens at his eyebrows and melts into steel-gray eyes. Then my gaze drifts lower, to where his lips are pursed into a thin line.

Ciro. Hale. Lucas. Zaid.

They were the ones who came back for me. They are the ones who have kept me safe and continue to keep me safe.

Not Brian. Not my dad.

These four men may have dragged me away from the altar, but they kept me from marrying a man who was willing to kill me. They may have stolen me from my old life, but that life was just an empty facade. And they may be hiding things from me, but at least they’re open with the fact that they can’t tell me. They’re not going behind my back and betraying me.

Did Brian ever love me? Or did he just use me—

“We don’t know if you were part of the plan from the beginning,” *Ciro* says, reading my thoughts. “He could have fallen in love with you first and then made the connection.”

“Or he could have gotten together with me all that time ago with the intent of selling me out,” I say, feeling another painful stab of betrayal but trying to bury it in bitterness. “And killing me.”

I look away, not wanting *Ciro* to see how much this actually hurts. Not wanting him to see the tears that are forming in my eyes, threatening to spill over.

“Either way, he was never planning on rescuing me,” I finish. “And if he ever loved me, that’s worse. Because that means greed trumped whatever feelings he had. He destroyed whatever existed between us for what? Money? Power?”

It’s always one of those things that leads people to do horrible things.

Or both.

I drag in a deep breath through my nose, trying to find some semblance of calm.

There's no way out now. I'm stuck here.

And what's worse, I don't know if I'm *thankful* for that fact. I don't know if I'm relieved that I'm back with these men and not with Brian—even if Brian truly had been here to rescue me, not to kill me.

"Stay here, Grace," *Ciro* murmurs, and I look back up at him just in time to see his throat dip. His hands hesitate at my jaw, featherlight touches that I want to lean in to. "Stay where you're safe."

His voice is earnest. He means it. He's asking me to stay, not dragging me into the bedroom and tying me to the bed.

But is it really up to me?

Damian Novak still expects *Hale* and his crew to deliver me to him. The leader of the *Novak Syndicate* is still out of the city, but the moment he comes back, he'll want them to fulfill the last stage of their mission.

He'll want me.

I still don't know what for, and I'm not even sure *Hale* knows. So how can these men truly protect me? Can anyone?

I push off the counter, careful not to brush against *Ciro* as I slip away from him. His touch is so rarely offered that I hate to give it up, but I can't handle it right now. Not when I'm so exhausted and vulnerable. Not when I'm likely to give too much of myself.

"I'm tired and filthy," I say, stepping across the large bathroom. "I need a shower."

He doesn't say anything, doesn't move an inch. I feel bad for pushing him away, but he's so hard to read that I can't even tell if I offended him or made him upset.

He's quiet, wearing that same blank expression he often does.

Void of emotion.

Void of feeling.

And he still hasn't made a move to leave the bathroom.

"Of course you won't let me be alone." I force a laugh, a manic sound. My rescuers are my captors. My enemies are my saviors. None of this makes fucking sense. "Of course I can't be trusted."

I don't even bother hiding myself as I strip out of my clothes and turn on the shower, waiting for the water to heat up. As soon as steam begins to waft through the air, I step under the spray.

The hot water feels like a thousand needles against my tender, damaged skin, and I hiss in a breath, letting the sharp sting steal my focus momentarily. I don't look over at Ciro, but I can feel him watching me through the shower's glass door.

Since we arrived back at the house, all of the men have been acting differently, and I don't like it.

I don't know how to function when they act anything close to *nice* or *human*. The anger I drew on to push them away was fueled by their arrogance and my frustration, but now that it's gone, I don't know what to do.

A tear drips down my cheek, joining the water droplets pouring down my body.

I turn away from Ciro, not wanting him to see my pain.

My weakness.

The hot cascade of water finally begins to soothe instead of hurt, and my muscles relax incrementally as more quiet tears flow down my cheeks.

It's utterly quiet in the bathroom, aside from the hiss of the shower, and I can't keep my gaze from darting over to Ciro, taking in his broad form through the glass. He stands still and stoic as a marble statue, watching me intently.

When he catches sight of my tear-streaked face, something shifts in his expression. His nostrils flare, and his jaw clenches. Then he strides forward, kicking off his shoes a second before he steps into the shower, fully clothed.

The glass door closes behind him, and I gaze up at him in shock.

CIRO

SOMETHING SPARKS DEEP INSIDE of me when I see Grace's face turn toward mine. Her entire body is wet, her face streaked with water droplets. But all I see are the tears. A heavy feeling grips my chest, something painful and sweet at the same time.

It's something I haven't felt in a long time, something I didn't even know I could feel again.

I've spent so many years burying emotions deep within me, to a place where they can't hurt me and I can't reach them, but Grace draws things out of me that I never expected.

You're in pain, I think. Let me help you.

Helping people isn't my specialty. I've never wanted to help people—it's the opposite of my job. I torture people. I bring the worst out of people.

But not Grace.

The pain in her calls to the pain in me, and without hesitation, I step forward, kicking off my shoes as I reach for the shower door. Her eyes widen in shock as I step into the shower, joining her under the water.

I don't know what I'm doing. I haven't thought this through. I'm simply acting on instinct, on the most primal feeling there is.

To protect.

Grace instantly shrinks away from me as water pelts my clothes, running down my shoulders and back.

Shit.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” I murmur roughly. I move toward her the same way she often moves around me—carefully and slowly.

She’s vulnerable right now, and I know how it feels to be vulnerable. But I also know how it feels to be trapped in your own darkness with no one to turn to, what it feels like to have to heal on your own, and I’m not going to let that happen to her.

She takes another step back, and I reach out a hand.

“Let me help you, Grace. Let me try.”

She looks at me with eyes brimming with tears, strength and vulnerability warring in her features. She’s been out of this world for six years, but I can still see the steel of a mafia princess in her. She was never raised to be a damsel in distress.

She cages her arms around her breasts, as if trying to protect herself from something. As if to hold as much of herself back as she can.

Water drips down my shoulders, neck, and onto my back as I patiently wait for her—and the battle of patience is less for her than it is for myself. As calm and comforting as I’m trying to be for her, it’s hard to do the same with my own conflicting feelings. The flood of emotions pumping through my veins is a surplus I’m not used to, and I fight the urge to push them away, to tamp them down.

Because as beautiful as she is, what attracts me to Grace isn’t so much her body as it is her mind—those passionate emotions, those intense feelings she expresses. Since my own captivity, I’ve trained myself to constantly be in a blank state. Never trusting, never showing more than I feel, never letting anyone know what’s going on inside.

But she’s not afraid to reveal her true self.

Her combination of strength and vulnerability is what first made my heart beat for her, and only her. It’s what made my walls come crashing down. It was the way that she seemed to say...

I know how you feel.

I reach out again, silently asking permission, watching her own walls slowly crumble. Finally, she stumbles toward me, wrapping her arms around me as mine go around her. We’re not even skin-to-skin, but I swear I can feel every inch of her as we stand together under the water.

Her small, fragile form is still tense in my arms. She’s stubborn, holding onto her doubt and suspicion even now.

You don't have to be scared. I won't let anyone hurt you. Ever.

My hand shakes as I run it through her hair and down her shoulders, resting it on her back.

"You're cold," I murmur into her chilled skin, turning us so that the water hits her back.

I pretend I didn't hear the rasp in my voice, my own body on high alert. So much contact after years of forcing myself to feel nothing, care for nothing, take nothing—it's been so long since I've let myself be touched in a tender way that I'm not sure how to proceed with her. But I want to.

So I let my hands lead the way. I hesitantly stroke the curve of her back, letting instinct guide me as I caress her soft skin, focusing on the little droplets of water running down her back, connecting in little streams. With that touch, her body finally gives in, melting against mine.

Wrapping my arms tighter around her, I lean in, nose nuzzling the back of her neck. I don't trust my hands anywhere but where they are, so I keep my caress on her back, feeling the way her breath slows against my chest, savoring the feel of her heart beating against mine.

"I'm scared, *Ciro*," she finally says. My lungs constrict at the sound of *fear* in her voice, wanting nothing but to protect her.

"I know."

"I'm scared of everything." Her words are a mere whisper against the base of my throat. "Of how I feel right now. Of how I felt when I thought *Brian* had saved me..."

When her words die, I hesitate to say anything. I never know what to say—it's never the right thing, never smooth or suave or actually helpful. But I understand her confliction. More than she knows.

"How did you feel?" I murmur. "When he came for you?"

"I felt like I had..." Her voice catches in her throat. "Betrayed you. *Hale*. *Zaid* and *Lucas*."

I look at the tattoos across my knuckles, a collection of roman numerals that spell out the day I got them—the same day I was rescued. I know what it's like to be held captive and then feel hope, only to be betrayed. And I know what it's like to be rescued by those same people *Grace* feels like she has betrayed.

Hale.

Zaid.

Lucas.

The tattoos were on my skin before I even took a shower, changed my clothes, ate anything. I wanted them as a reminder to never take advantage of freedom, and moreover, to never trust another person with my feelings.

“I can’t even look at myself in the mirror.” Grace’s words come out in a rush. Her heartbeat accelerates against my chest, and my arms tighten around her. “I can’t look at the person that I’ve become. I can’t face her.”

Fuck.

I hate to even hear those words come out of her mouth. I hate that she thinks any of that shit about herself when she’s one of the strongest people I know—and I know some tough-as-nails motherfuckers.

Water droplets fall from my hair as I shake my head. I know she can’t see it, but it’s a visceral response to her words.

Because they’re so fucking wrong.

“Who you’ve become is a survivor,” I say, staring at the fogged up glass of the shower wall as memories claw through my mind. “You survived, Grace. You survived at the church, you survived us, you survived Brian. You lived. You fought. And that’s the only thing that matters.”

She doesn’t answer for a long moment, and I don’t add anything else. I’m not good at putting my thoughts into words. I don’t know how to explain to her a truth I’ve seen proven over and over again in my life—that not everyone would have done what she did.

Some people would’ve given up. Some people would’ve curled into a ball and let the world kick the shit out of them without ever fighting back.

And maybe those people, if they survived till the end, would feel *pure*. Maybe they wouldn’t feel conflicted like she does now for the things she’s done.

Survival is messy. It isn’t pretty.

There’s no pride in it.

No dignity.

It’s all shades of gray and dark splotches of red. It’s driven by the single most primal instinct we have. To *exist*. To stay alive.

And she did. She’s here.

She survived to fight another day, to keep clawing her way to a place where the world makes sense again, where she’s in control once more.

And even though she may think she lost too much of herself in the process, that she'll never find who she was again, I can still see it in her—the thing that's so hard to hold on to when you're fighting for your life.

Grace.

I should probably tell her all of that. But I'm shit with words, and I know if I tried to say it out loud, it wouldn't come out right.

So I just hold her under the water, arms wrapped tightly around her and fingers tangling in the ends of her hair as her heartbeat slowly calms against mine.

GRACE

I STARE AT THE CEILING, unable to sleep.

It scares me how similar this situation is to less than forty-eight hours ago, yet my feelings are completely different. I don't know where I belong anymore. I feel like my heart should be tugging me in one direction or the other, but I'm stuck on a razor's edge.

Conflicted.

It's clear things are different now. When the men rescued me, something changed between myself and all of them—first with Hale's apology and then later with Ciro in the bathroom. I don't know what on earth possessed him to step into the shower at that moment, but I didn't even realize how much I needed his comfort until I allowed myself to accept it.

I know he doesn't trust easily, doesn't like physical contact, and it means something that he gave that part of himself to me.

It means a lot.

It has to be near dawn by now. I should be exhausted, but sleep won't come.

The house is completely silent, leaving me alone with my thoughts. No voices or sounds of movement penetrate the silence, and I'm not sure what to make of it. I'm not tied up or restrained. No one is sitting by my bed or outside of my room, watching me, waiting for me to try to run again.

Out of habit, I glance toward the bedroom door, daring myself to make an escape. Willing myself to. Forcing myself to sit up, I wait until my head stops spinning to move.

Do I even want to leave?

The second my feet hit the floor, I stop. Over and over again, I ask myself that same question, wanting a different answer. Wishing the right answer would come easier.

I know if I ran right now, they would find me. Bring me back. I'd be foolish to think I could get farther than I did last time, especially now that I'm on my own.

But if I don't truly want to leave... what does that mean? Am I even a captive?

"Fuck this," I whisper into the darkness, getting out of the bed. "Fuck all of this."

I hate that this is so hard.

I want to give in, but I'm afraid of letting go of the light. I'm afraid that if I give myself freely into the darkness, everything will change.

Everything has already changed.

Pushing out of my thoughts, I force myself to move toward the bedroom door and pull it open. I make my way down the long hall and descend the stairs to the first floor. But instead of looking for another open window or trying the front door, I turn right and head for someplace familiar.

The kitchen.

I'm not really that hungry, but I poke around the large kitchen anyway, looking for something to distract myself with. The refrigerator and cupboards are well stocked, but nothing sounds appetizing.

My head snaps up at the sound of movement from the other side of the kitchen, my body instantly alert. But I relax when I see it's only Zaid and Lucas. They prove exactly my point—even though I'm not tied up, I'm still being closely monitored.

I'm too tired for this, I think, starting to turn away from them.

But something intense burns in their eyes. Something about the way both of them stalk toward me tells me that they are not here as my captors.

They're here with a different purpose.

I open my mouth to say something snarky, but Lucas grabs my hips and pulls me flush up against his body before I can say anything. His mouth comes crashing down on mine, desperately passionate, consuming me with his kiss. My hands instinctively reach up to brace myself against his chest as he growls against my lips, sending a lick of fire through my body.

“Lucas, what are—”

“That night between the three of us...” He steps away from me, and I instantly feel his absence. “That was meant to be just the beginning.”

“What do you mean?” My heart stutters in my chest.

Before Lucas can answer, Zaid presses me against the counter, his large hand palming the back of my head.

His kiss is nearly identical to his brother’s, and my body reacts to his touch, moving with him, pulling him closer, desperately needing something more. He leaves no space between our bodies, letting me feel the heavy arousal that grinds against my lower belly.

As our kiss deepens, he tugs me away from the counter, stepping backward as he keeps me pinned to his body. A second later, I feel Lucas step up behind me.

Completing the circle.

Caging me between the two of them.

Enveloping me.

He’s hard too. I can feel his cock against my ass, and four hands roam over my body, making me feel almost dizzy as I try to track which hand belongs to whom. But it doesn’t even matter. That’s the whole point.

It’s not about what one or the other of them is doing.

It’s about them both.

About the three of us.

“We were meant to be more, Grace,” Lucas whispers, nipping at my ear and sending a jolt of sensation straight down to my clit. “We were always meant to be more.”

Zaid grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger, breaking our kiss long enough to gaze down at me with green eyes that gleam in the dim pre-dawn light streaming through the windows. “It’s not over. Unless you say it is.”

I blink up at him, barely able to focus with the feel of their bodies so close, with Lucas’s warm lips teasing my neck and the curve of my shoulder. But I can see only truth in Zaid’s eyes.

He’s saying what I think he is.

He’s offering me a way out.

It reminds me of what Ciro said in the bathroom, when he asked me to stay instead of demanding I remain, and I wonder if any of these men have

cleared this with Hale. What would their leader, and the son of Damian Novak, have to say about offering a prisoner freedom?

Would they go against Hale's orders for me?

Would Hale go against his father's commands?

The punishment for that would be... unfathomable. Hale might survive, but I'm not sure the others would. From what little I remember of him, Damian is regarded as a fair leader, but he doesn't tolerate betrayal.

Hell, that's the whole fucking reason I'm here.

So I ground myself in the two solid, muscled bodies that encase me as I swallow hard and throw myself off the razor's edge.

"No." I shake my head, and Zaid's hand moves with the motion. "It's not over."

A slow smile spreads across his face, and it changes his entire appearance. For a second, I can clearly see the boy I knew six years ago, and it feels in this moment as if no time at all has passed. As if our years apart were just a strange dream that I'm finally waking up from.

As if some part of our souls have always known the truth.

That wasn't the end of our story.

"Thank you for saving me," I say suddenly, my throat constricting. "Thank you for coming for me."

"Always, kitten."

There's a fierceness in Zaid's tone, and his grip on my chin tightens slightly before he drops his head to claim another searing kiss.

"Whoever the fuck Brian was working for, we'll find them, and we'll make them fucking pay," Lucas adds, grasping my waist possessively as his warm breath tickles my neck.

Maybe I should be afraid of the dark promise in his voice, but I'm beyond being frightened of the violence these men exude. There's something familiar, almost comforting about it. And maybe I've got some of that same violence inside me, because I find myself hoping they get their shot at vengeance.

"He definitely wasn't working alone," I murmur, leaning back into Lucas's touch as Zaid moves forward, sandwiching me even more tightly between them. "I heard him mention the name Calvin, but I didn't get a last name."

“What did you just say?” Lucas stiffens, his entire body turning to a solid plank behind me.

“Calvin,” I repeat, looking at Zaid as he takes a step back from me. He’s staring down at me like he’s seen a ghost. “Brian said something about a guy named Calvin. I might’ve heard it wrong. I was in a trunk, and he was almost out of earshot.”

“No, you didn’t hear anything wrong,” Zaid says, running a hand through his hair. He takes another step away from me, meeting Lucas’s gaze over my shoulder. “We need to go.”

“What—”

The protest dies on my lips as I absorb the seriousness that’s taken over both of their expressions. Whatever I just said has deep significance, and the heat that was building between the three of us has been snuffed out like a candle. Both of them are in soldier mode now, their bodies practically bristling with agitation.

“Who’s Calvin?” I glance between them. “Do you know him?”

“No,” Lucas mutters, grabbing my hand and striding quickly toward the door with Zaid right behind us. “It’s not a person. It’s a place.”

“We need to wake Ciro and Hale.” Zaid’s voice is hard. “You need to tell them exactly what you just told us. Everything you remember about Brian’s conversation.”

I nod, nearly tripping over the stairs as we take them at a fast clip, glancing over my shoulder at Zaid. “Okay. But I don’t understand. How is Calvin a place?”

“Not Calvin. *Calvin’s*.” Lucas stops abruptly at the top of the stairs, turning to face me with a grim look on his face. “It’s a bar. It was a syndicate front for a couple years, but that isn’t widely known. Not even by the cops.”

I blink, my gaze shifting from him to Zaid. “But you think whoever Brian was talking to *did* know about it? That would mean...”

“Yeah.” Zaid’s jaw clenches. “There’s a mole in the Novak Syndicate. A traitor.”

To Be Continued...

Ruthless Knights, book two in the *Dark Elite* series, is out now! One-click it on Amazon or read free in Kindle Unlimited [HERE](#).

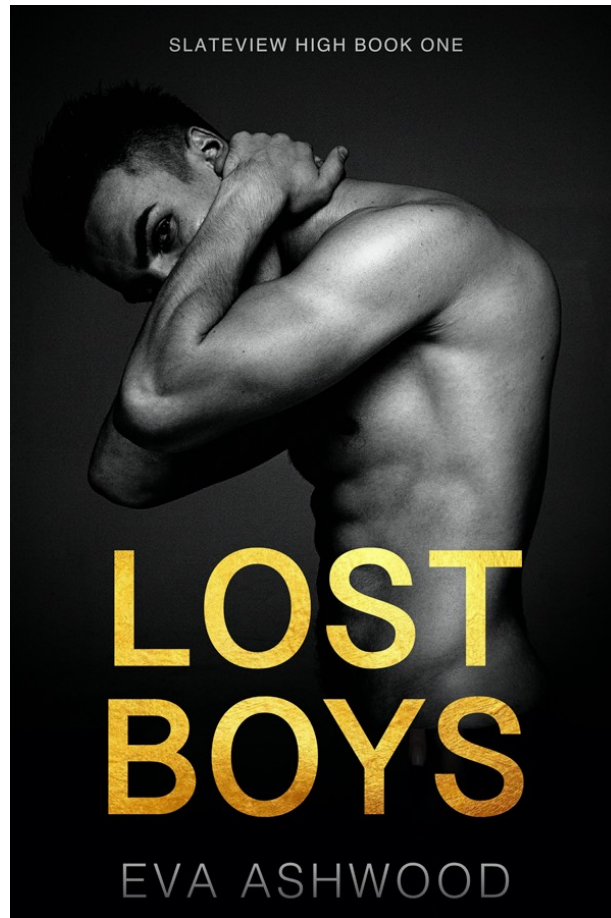
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"You're in our world now, Princess. You're ours."

My whole life, I've been groomed as American royalty, raised to be the perfect daughter of the wealthy elite.

On my sixteenth birthday, my father bought me an Aston Martin.

And on my seventeenth birthday, the Feds took everything away.

With my father in prison for fraud and nothing left to our name, my mom and I are forced to move to a tiny house across town, and I transfer to Slateview Public.

The only problem is, nearly everyone at my new school has reason to despise my family name. They want to see a princess brought low, and they'll do whatever it takes to make me fall.

Money was the language of my old world, but violence is the language of my new one. The only way I'll survive until graduation is to make a deal with three gorgeous, dangerous devils—the ones everyone calls the Lost Boys.

If I accept their bargain, Bishop, Misael, and Kace will protect me.

But they'll own me too.

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