

RUTHLESS KNIGHTS

THE DARK ELITE: BOOK 2

EVA ASHWOOD

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CONTENTS

1. [Hale](#)
2. [Grace](#)
3. [Grace](#)
4. [Zaid](#)
5. [Grace](#)
6. [Ciro](#)
7. [Grace](#)
8. [Grace](#)
9. [Grace](#)
10. [Lucas](#)
11. [Grace](#)
12. [Ciro](#)
13. [Grace](#)
14. [Hale](#)
15. [Grace](#)
16. [Grace](#)
17. [Grace](#)
18. [Grace](#)
19. [Lucas](#)
20. [Grace](#)
21. [Hale](#)
22. [Grace](#)
23. [Grace](#)
24. [Zaid](#)
25. [Grace](#)
26. [Grace](#)

[Books by Eva Ashwood](#)

HALE

METHODICALLY, I swing my fists against the heavy punching bag. The rhythm is usually enough to keep my thoughts at bay, but not tonight. Over and over again, I punch and dodge, keeping on my toes and channeling my anger into the bag, trying to expel my rage before it sinks deeper into me and eats me alive.

Thwap.

My heart thunders in my chest, but it has nothing to do with the physical exertion I hoped would distract me. It's about something else, someone else—

Grace.

The roar of adrenaline that's pumping through my body is just an echo of what I felt when we rescued her, when I saw that bastard of a fiancé, Brian, pressing the gun to her chest.

Helpless.

Never in my life have I felt so fucking helpless.

Never have I felt so fucking desperate that everything seemed to stop for a moment. I pride myself in my ability to think through any situation, no matter how stressful. To keep my cool no matter what. But when I saw that gun, there was only one thought in my mind, only one instinct that made me raise my own piece and pull the trigger.

Thwap thwap thwap.

I shot him to save her, and I'd do it again in a second. But something inside me flinched when I saw the blood spray over her face, her body. I can still see the haunted look in her eyes as she stared up at Brian before he slumped against her, dead.

Something twists in my stomach.

Grace didn't need to see that again. She didn't *deserve* to see yet another person she loved shot right before her eyes in cold blood. She didn't deserve to have her freedom taken away.

You're not enough. You're not fucking good enough for her. She deserves better.

Even though I saved her in the end, I'll always be the bad guy. I'll always be the person that ripped her life away from her and stole everything she had. To her, I'll always be her greatest enemy, her hatred incarnate.

She doesn't want you. Look how you treated her, asshole. You think you deserve her?

With each punch, I fight the doubt. The pain. The panic. The absolute empty ruin that's welling up inside of me—emptiness I'm starting to realize only she can fill. It hurts more than any stab, any punch, any gunshot or wound that has ever been inflicted on my body. It hurts worse than the injury to my leg that still twinges with pain on an almost daily basis. It's like a fucking disease that's spreading

through me and taking over, inch by inch.

My mind. My heart. My body.

“Fuck,” I mutter, pulling away from the punching bag as sweat drips down my chest.

You can't have her.

That's the truth.

It's a truth I keep reminding myself of, one that I want to grasp and take hold of, but I can't. I can't fucking accept it. The emptiness in my chest is swallowing me whole. Before Grace, I could ignore it, but now that I've had her...

Well, I'd better get used to feeling this fucking empty, because I can't have her.

I'm never going to have her.

The thought rises from my stomach to my heart, then surges up my throat like a wave of acidic bile. I rip the bindings off my knuckles before attacking the bag again, needing to feel the full weight of what I deserve.

Because Grace is right. She's always been right. I punish myself. I punish myself by punishing her. Giving in to her. And when I give in to her, the guilt consumes me, and I have to punish myself again and again and again.

Thwap.

Thwap.

Thwap.

The raw leather against my bare knuckles burns with each punch, but I don't stop when the pain tears through me. I'm not going to leave this room until my thoughts are clear of Grace and my head is on straight. I'm not going to leave this room until she's absolutely fucking exorcised from my system.

Thwap.

Ever since that night, everything has been *wrong*. It's a crazy feeling in my lungs, my body, my bones. It eats me alive and consumes me whole, twists my mind and doesn't let me go. I can't focus on anything for more than a few seconds before I'm brought back to those moments.

Brought back to her.

I was fucked up when she came into my office that night. We'd lost a man when a deal went south, and I was drunk and pissed off. My walls were down. And when I saw Grace, when I touched her soft skin and inhaled her addictive scent, every scrap of self-control I prided myself on vanished.

I fucked her on my desk.

It wasn't gentle, and it definitely wasn't sweet.

But she met me stroke for stroke, her body wrapping around mine and her sweet pussy clenching around me like we were made for each other. Like the universe had conspired to bring us to that moment. To bring us together.

I've never felt the way I did in those few seconds of being totally connected to her before I fucked up and shoved her away. In that moment, Brian didn't exist. The syndicate didn't exist. It was just me and Grace, and it was fucking perfect. Even in my drunken state, I could feel the seismic shift inside myself. I felt... whole.

Complete.

Grace has wrecked me.

Absolutely fucking wrecked me.

“I'm fucked up,” I grunt under my breath. “Goddammit. I fucked up.”

Thwap.

My knuckles split open, raw from punching.

Thwap.

I shoved her away because I can't have her, because I'll never be good enough for her. She'll always hate me for what I did to her, and she has the right to hate me. It's probably *better* that she hates me.

Then why do I still want a chance? Why do I want her to love me instead?

I should let her go. Knowing that there's nothing for me with her, I should be able to just let her fade away. Ignore her.

But I can't.

Thwap.

I give the punching bag one final hit before I pull back, leaving it swinging back and forth in the middle of the room. Wiping my brow with my forearm, I suck in a few deep breaths. Then I reach for a cold water bottle and pour it over my head, the liquid instantly warming against my hot skin.

Despite the intensity of my workout, my mind hasn't slowed down. Grace isn't the only thing fucking up my head these days. I've been on-edge ever since we found out we have a traitor in the Novak Syndicate.

Someone on the inside working against us.

Motherfucker.

I twist my arms into a stretch above my head, easing tension out of the ligaments, before lowering my hands in front of me, looking at the blood drying on my knuckles as I finish cooling down. The blood is already clotting. My knuckles are calloused, used to the weekly beating they endure against the heavy bag.

Carefully, I stretch out my hamstrings next, focusing on my breath.

"*Christ.*" I curse, flinching as pain shoots straight through my fucked up leg like an electric shock.

I try to walk it out, but it throbs and pulses mercilessly, a painful knot forming in my thigh. Grasping for anything, I steady myself on the workbench, cringing in pain as the sharp jolt fades to a dull ache. I try to stretch my leg again, more carefully this time, but the tension lingers and my muscles are stiff.

"Get it the fuck together, Hale," I mutter, breathing through an agonizing pinch of muscles and veins. "You can't—"

You can't appear weak in front of your father.

I don't want to say the words out loud. I don't want to speak them into truth. I love the fucker, but Damian Novak has always been a driven, uncompromising man. Even though he knows I got injured for a worthy cause—freeing Ciro from a rival gang who held him hostage—the lingering pain from the bullet wound feels like a weakness.

I hate the way he looks at my leg sometimes, like he's lost part of his son with it.

Despite that, I know he has faith in me. He's given me more and more responsibility within the organization. His captains though? Some of them seem to think the weakness in my leg extends to my spirit. There are those who look at me with suspicion, doubting my ability to lead when my father steps down and passes the job to me.

They're fucking wrong.

This is my legacy. My birthright. And I won't lose what my father built.

I take a deep breath, shoving down the anger that's flaring inside me all over again. I just have to get through today.

Today, we deliver Grace into the hands of my father. I'm not happy about it, but that doesn't change what we have to do—it's our duty, our obligation. I don't have a choice in the matter.

If I did, she wouldn't be anywhere near him.

WHEN I STEP out of the bathroom, still securing the towel around my waist, Ciro is standing in the doorway of the bedroom.

“You ready?” he asks.

I nod but don't say anything. I stride over to the closet to grab a suit, and his gaze tracks me as he leans against the jamb.

“You don't have to do that, Hale,” he says gruffly.

“Do what?” I say without turning around.

I know what he's talking about. I saw the way he glanced at my hands, the torn up knuckles. I'm not ashamed of my self-destructive habits, my coping mechanisms, but to have them so directly acknowledged makes my jaw tighten a little. Ciro already knows my flaws, my weaknesses—he has them too. We just ignore them.

It's an unspoken rule that we don't talk about this kind of shit. You learn quickly that there's nothing personal in the mafia. *Feelings* are a weakness. A fault. We all have our own ways of coping with the violent turbulence of our minds—drugs, women, drinking, violence—but displaying anything other than a cold exterior is basically asking to get shot.

Still, instead of ignoring Ciro, I find myself saying, “I know.”

“Then why do you keep doing it?”

A picture of Grace flashes into my mind.

Her skin.

Her scent.

Her hands.

Because I don't have any other way.

I don't respond, pulling out a bespoke suit and shooting a glance over my shoulder at my best friend. Even without hearing the words, I'm pretty sure he knows exactly why my knuckles are so shredded today.

“Is she ready?” I ask.

GRACE

I'VE BEEN DREADING this all day, anxiety gnawing a hole in my stomach.

It's nearly evening before I finally work up the courage to open the box that was on top of my dresser this morning when I woke up—likely delivered by one of the guys while I was asleep. There's no note on it, but I'm assuming it has something to do with our meeting with Damian tonight.

Unable to put it off any longer, I peel back the cardboard and tissue paper and unfold the dress inside.

My heart stutters as I stare at the garment.

Running my hands over the dark blue fabric, I bite down on my lower lip. Nostalgia for a long-ago time washes over me. I wore outfits like this to the syndicate parties I attended with my mother and father—dressed up like the mafia princess I was.

Once, I *belonged* in a dress like this.

Once, I was a part of this world.

The soft fabric almost burns me, and a confusing mix of emotions churns in my stomach at the sight of it. Dropping the gorgeous dress back into the box, I close the lid and move toward the closet next to the attached bathroom in search of something different to wear. I'm meeting the head of the Novak Syndicate for the first time in years, and I know my choice of clothing will make a statement.

It still feels strange to walk freely across the room after the weeks I spent tied to the bed, one of the guys always watching me. But ever since the night Brian tried to kill me, I haven't been tied down or restrained in any way.

Even though I'm seemingly free to wander the house, I've found myself stuck in this room for the past two days by my own choice. Honestly, I'm scared of myself. Of what I might let myself do, where I might let my feet wander.

“Focus, Grace. Focus.” I repeat my new mantra, blowing out a breath. “Just get through this one thing. One problem at a time.”

In the closet, I don't find anything but the same variation of clothes that I've been wearing for the past week. Jeans, t-shirts, and sweaters. I hate to admit defeat, but I know rummaging through this closet isn't going to yield anything suitable—the guys want me to wear the dress, which means I'm not going to wear anything else.

Steeling myself, I walk back across the room and pick up the box again, dumping the contents onto the bed. I strip, careful of the healing bullet wound in my side, and quickly pull the dress over my head, trying not to notice how familiar this all feels. The last dress I wore was a wedding dress, but before that, I had settled into a routine of simple, practical clothes. Clothes that matched the cozy

suburban life I was trying to build for myself in Washington.

Slipping on this dress for a meeting with the head of a powerful mafia syndicate is like slipping into the past. Into a part of my life that I tried for a long time to forget.

I don't know if whoever picked the dress out was trying to stir up old memories, but that's exactly what they did. When I look at my reflection in the mirror, my eyes widen.

It's like looking at a picture of myself in the past—one that's moving and breathing and living. I look the same, but so much different.

The dress is nearly identical to one I wore to a party just before my mother's death, but my body has changed since those days. The neckline and tapered waist now accentuate and compliment my curves, creating a perfectly sensual yet modest look. Whoever picked it out certainly has taste, and as much as I want to hate the dress and the reminder of the past, I can't.

It's absolutely stunning, and more than that—it makes *me* feel stunning.

Wanted.

Taken care of.

Smoothing my hands over the soft fabric, I freeze at the sound of the door opening softly. My gaze darts up to the mirror, and I find Zaid leaning against the jamb behind me. He does nothing to hide his reaction to my dress.

"You look stunning," is all he says, voice low.

But his eyes say much more than that as his gaze trails down the curve of my back and calves appreciatively, moving back up to my reflection in the mirror.

"It's a beautiful dress," I say absently, brushing my hands down the fabric again. My palms prickle with sweat. "I feel like I'm meeting a king."

He takes a slow step toward me. "You are... in a way."

My gaze flickers back to the green eyes reflected in the mirror, holding his gaze. There's so much I want to ask him about what's going to happen, but I'm afraid of sounding weak. Scared. The violence of my father's lifestyle rarely spilled over into our home. He protected and insulated my mother and me from the darker aspects of his work. But still, one thing he instilled in me that I'll never forget is how dangerous it can be to show weakness.

And even though I've come to trust the four men who stole me from my wedding, who later *saved* me from the man I was going to marry, I'm still holding a part of myself back. I don't want them to know just how fucked up and confused I am about all of this.

I don't reply to Zaid's words, and he opens his mouth as if to say something else but closes it again.

I've hardly seen any of them since the night Brian tried to kill me—the night I tried to run away. But even though I've been hiding in my room like a coward, I swear I can feel a change in the atmosphere that hovers over the entire house.

Something has shifted between all of us.

I know I'm not the only one who senses it, not the only one who isn't sure what it is. I'm not sure I even want to know what it is. I don't know where I stand anymore. Am I the enemy to be watched with suspicion, or am I becoming one of them?

The thought has crossed my mind more than once.

It consumes me.

Am I becoming one of them?

Can I even be one of them?

Even if I wanted to become part of this world again, I don't know if it's possible. No matter how

protective they may seem of me now, I know how deep mafia loyalties run. These men have sworn their lives and their loyalty to each other and their syndicate. Just because the flames of the past have rekindled between us, that doesn't mean they'll choose me over the organization that's meant everything to them.

"Are you afraid?" Zaid's brows pull together a little as he watches me.

I turn around to face him. "No."

Lie.

His eyes say it, and my face betrays it. No one in their right mind *wouldn't* be afraid of facing Damian Novak. He's more powerful and dangerous than anyone else in this city. I would be a fool to assume he'll deal with me kindly, especially considering how much Hale hated me at first. My father betrayed the Novaks, and Hale was certain I was part of that betrayal. I'm not sure part of him doesn't *still* think that.

Doesn't still blame me for my father's sins.

I don't know what Damian is going to do with me, but scarier than that is the fact that not even Hale, Zaid, Lucas, or Ciro seem to know what he's going to do with me. They're being held in just as much suspense as I am. I could be walking straight into a trap for all I know. For all *they* know.

They say they're protecting me, but are they really?

"He could kill me," I say quietly.

"No. Don't think that, Grace." Zaid takes another step forward, finally reaching me. He turns me around and lifts my chin up, forcing me to meet his serious gaze. "Listen to me. That. Will. Not. Happen. We'll look out for you. I promise. Okay?"

My heart stutters in my chest, tripping over his words. I want to believe him. I want to believe the promise I hear in his voice, but I can't. They can make all the promises they want, but I know that they still answer to the powers above them. No matter how much they say they'll protect me, they have a duty to uphold. And no one is more loyal than a mafia soldier.

"I think I should..."

The words die on my lips as I watch his intense gaze drag to my mouth. The emotion in his eyes shifts from worry to hunger.

"Should what?" he asks, smirk playing at his lips. His words seem to brush up against my mouth.

His head lowers, and I tilt my chin up without considering the consequences. The fear bleeds out of my own body, replaced by the heat that spreads outward from every place Zaid's skin touches mine.

Over and over and over, these men tear down my walls.

Faster than I can rebuild them.

"I won't let anything hurt you, Grace," he promises, his voice rough. "Ever."

When his lips press against mine, I can feel the restraint in him. He wants more, wants to eat me alive. But this kiss isn't a claiming. It's a promise.

Lucas strides into the room, but Zaid doesn't even flinch as his brother enters. He definitely doesn't try to hide or make excuses for what we were just doing.

And why would he?

It's not like Lucas hasn't seen me kiss his twin before. I kissed both of them in the kitchen a few nights ago, pinned between their bodies in a way that lit my skin on fire. Once, when we were younger, we did much more than that. I'm pretty sure they know I fucked Hale, and maybe they know I've kissed Ciro too.

That's another thing contributing to the riot of confusion swirling inside my chest.

I have feelings for all four of the men who captured me. And they all know it.

“You look incredible, princess.”

Lucas’s face, so similar to his twin’s, splits into a wide grin as Zaid and I separate. They both have bright green eyes, blond hair, and infectious smiles. Individually, they’re almost impossible to resist, but when they combine their charm, they’re absolutely devastating.

“Doesn’t she?” Zaid’s voice is filled with so much pride it almost hurts. “She looks like a fuckin’ queen.”

“Are you ready?” Lucas asks, dragging his gaze away from the dress and up to my face.

I try to nod, but the simple action seems to be lost in the stiffening of my body. It’s echoed in the nervous buzz of energy that blankets us, reminding me of what tonight is actually about. I know I’m not the only one who’s dreading this. As little as I want to face Hale’s father, I can tell by the twins’ stiff postures that they don’t want to put me in front of the wolf either.

“Everything will be okay, Grace,” Lucas promises, his face softening.

I want to believe them both. I do. I desperately want to let go and trust them. Feel safe.

“Let’s go,” I say, pushing away from them and striding toward the door. “I’d like to get this over with.”

Just as I’d like to believe them.

But I’m not sure I can.

GRACE

NONE of us speak much on the drive over.

Hale and Ciro murmur a few words to each other in the front, and Zaid and Lucas each rest a hand on one of my knees, the gesture protective and possessive.

When we pull to a stop, we're in a dark alleyway, muddy and dank from last night's rain. It's early evening, and the city is alive around us, illuminated by the setting sun and the lights of high-rise buildings that tower overhead.

I know enough about mafia business to know that we're not meeting Damian in a trash filled alleyway, so it doesn't surprise me when Hale leads us to a seemingly unimportant metal door set in the side of the large brick building, opening it up with a key he pulls from his pocket.

As we step inside, a faint pulse of music crawls over my skin, and I get an inkling of where we might be. The Onyx Cocktail Club is an upscale Chicago nightclub on the surface, but behind the scenes, it serves as a base of operations for the Novak Syndicate. The last time I was here was when my father proudly introduced me to the man he once called his boss.

Damian Novak.

Hale leads us down a hallway, and the music becomes more and more muted until it's disappeared entirely, replaced by our quiet footsteps. Our surroundings are dimly lit and luxurious: stained cherry wood accents, expensive carpets, and sconces on the walls that illuminate the space with warm, low light. I know the front of the club is no less beautiful. There's a reason why this place is popular amongst the wealthy and elite—it makes its clientele feel sophisticated and important, somehow above common society.

When the heavy mahogany door that I know leads to Damian's office comes into view, my nerves spike. Because behind that door lies my fate, and whether I'm innocent or guilty has little bearing on how things will play out. My life is entirely in Damian's control. Whatever he decides to do with me, his word is the *final* word.

Softer than a butterfly, a hand brushes against mine, startling me out of my panic. The tips of Ciro's fingers curl against my palm for only a second before they're gone. Though the touch is fleeting, it brings everything back into focus.

My heart squeezes a little.

Ciro doesn't like to be touched. The scars of his past have made him shut himself off from the rest of the world, transforming the quiet, somewhat shy boy I once knew into an eerily blank man.

He's not blank, though. There's so much more inside him than he admits or even realizes.

And this is the second time he's reached out to comfort me in the past few days.

I send him a silent *thank you* as the door opens and we step into Damian's office.

The room is as luxurious as the rest of this place, but there's something cold about it, almost like a mausoleum. I half expect to find shelves of bodies lining the walls, but all I find is the king of the Novak Syndicate, as Zaid called him, sitting behind a large desk in a wingback chair.

I pretend I don't notice how the four men who escorted me into the room fall into position around me. Zaid and Lucas stand at either side while Hiro stays behind me, Hale's body creating a temporary barrier of safety between myself and Damian.

"Father." Hale dips his head, taking a single step forward.

While they exchange formalities, I peer around Hale to take in his father. It's impossible not to pick up on how similar the two men look. Although much older than his son, Damian has the same deep blue eyes, strong brow, and straight nose. His dark brown hair is peppered with strands of gray, but his jaw and cheekbones are still sharp, his features darkly handsome.

He's the exact picture of what Hale will probably look like thirty years from now, when he's replaced his father, married, and had an heir of his own.

For some reason, the thought of Hale with a son and a wife strikes a strange chord inside of me. My stomach clenches, and I push the mental image away quickly.

Damian doesn't give me any time to think about it anyway.

He turns his attention to me, standing from the chair. "Grace. It's been a while."

His eyes narrow a little as he watches me, gesturing for me to come a little closer.

Hale's shoulders tense, then he takes a step to the side, allowing me to move forward to meet the beast in front of me.

I try not to drag my feet as I walk toward Damian's desk, letting him take my hand in his. He watches me like a cat watching a mouse, his eyes filled with curiosity and eerie calm. Though his tone was light when he spoke, that doesn't put me at ease.

No. It scares me more.

I know that violence is never far away in the mafia, and if I say or do something wrong, Damian won't hesitate to give the order to one of his men.

Shoot her.

He probably wouldn't even have to say the words. A signal and I'd be gone. I swallow, shoving that terrifying thought aside.

"Grace Weston." Damian's voice is almost a purr, a controlled calm that sends a chill down my spine. "You've changed very much since I last saw you. How long has it been?"

We both know he knows how long it's been, but he wants me to answer.

"Six years. About."

"The time has been good to you. Washington was good to you. You look lovely." His gaze flickers down my body, although his eyes don't fill with heat like Hale's do when he looks at me. This gaze is assessing, not sexual, but it still makes goose bumps spring out across my skin. "You look much older."

"Yeah. So do you."

The words come out before I can stop them.

Hale tenses next to me, and I fight the urge to cringe, but the low chuckle that falls from Damian's lips relaxes my muscles a bit. He took my sassy response in stride, but that doesn't mean he'll tolerate it again. And I don't dare look over at Hale, but I know if I did, his eyes would be telling me two words.

Be careful.

He's right. I'm dealing with a predator here. A man who wields a kind of power I can barely comprehend. If someone steps too far out of line, he won't hesitate to let them know they've taken things too far.

With a bullet. Or two.

"Please, have a seat." He gestures to a chair in front of the desk, and I obey without question. Hale steps up to stand beside me as I sit.

The rest of the men fall into position behind us, a presence I can *feel* even though I can't see them. I glance over at Hale nervously, then quickly avert my eyes. I don't want Damian to think something is going on between us. It feels dangerous to give up that secret. Instead, I focus on the desk in front of me, hiding any outward signs of the storm inside of me.

Damian shifts his gaze to the three behind me. "Leave us."

Hale stiffens next to me—clearly, he wasn't anticipating having his men dismissed like this. He expected to have them as backup, and I don't like this any more than he does. I don't have to turn around to feel the way that Zaid, Lucas, and Ciro hesitate behind me. The temperature in the room seems to spike, and I clench my hands on my lap as my breath catches.

Then Hale gives his friends a sharp nod, telling them to follow the order.

The door shuts behind them. Nausea rolls through me like I've just been closed into that mental image of a mausoleum, quiet and still as the dead.

Damian wastes no time, turning to me with a smile.

"And how is Samuel?" His tone is laced with something wrong, something that sounds a whole lot like amusement.

A sharp pain goes through my chest at the sound of my father's name, but I shove it away, as well as the bite of bitterness. I'm aware Damian's trying to provoke me, but I won't fucking let him.

I stare him dead in the eye. "He's dead. As you know."

"Which is exactly why you are here." He leans forward in his chair, propping his forearms on the desk. "May I ask you a few questions?"

It may be posed as a request, but I don't have any choice in the matter.

"Sure. Why not?" My jaw is locked tight, and it's hard to keep the bite out of my voice.

"Why did you and your father flee Chicago?"

Proud that my voice is steadier than I feel, I say, "I was under the impression that he was grieving the death of my mother. He was heartbroken at her loss, and he didn't want to risk losing me too." Another sharp twang of frustration stabs at me. "But I'm not sure if that was the case anymore. I don't know why he did what he did."

"You and your father were close, is that true?" He gives me a penetrating look, crossing his hands on the desk.

I thought so, but I'm not even sure of that anymore. But I don't say that out loud. Better to keep my answers short and simple. "We were."

"Did he tell you anything, Grace? Either before you left Chicago or after? Mention any names, say anything strange?"

"No, he didn't," I say firmly. "I didn't know that he had anything to do with Landon's imprisonment. Not until very recently."

It's the truth. I've told Hale the same thing a thousand times. Either he didn't brief his father on those earlier interrogations, or Damian thinks he can draw something out of me that Hale was unable to discover.

Does he think Hale went too easy on me? That he didn't press me hard enough?

Thinking back to the first time Hale barged into the room where I was being kept prisoner, looming over the bed like a darkly handsome monster as he demanded answers, I can't quite agree.

Then again, Damian knows me. He must remember how stubborn I am.

"Let's talk about your wedding." The older man leans back in his chair, relaxing. Damian is an expert at playing politics, so I know not to trust the exterior. He could be seething inside, and an outside observer would never know it. "You were marrying the young cop."

"Brian."

Bastard, I add in my head. I'm still not sure what else to think about him other than a string of obscenities in place of his name and a string of curses for my own stupidity.

"Yes, Brian." Damian nods. "Tell me, how did the wedding go?"

You know exactly how the wedding went.

Calmly, I answer, "By my standards, not the best. You could say I dodged a bullet."

"You're clever." Damian's eyes crease with amusement but narrow in suspicion within half a second. The abrupt switch in his mood makes my stomach drop. "Who was the other group that ambushed the ceremony?"

"I don't know." As I've told Hale. A million times. I clench my jaw because I can't clench my hands.

"Did you call them in?" Damian presses. I'm not as good at hiding my emotions as he is, and I'm sure he can tell I'm irritated. "Brian wasn't working alone. From what I've gleaned, he'd been dirty for years. He cut deals with several gangs and mafia syndicates over the years, looking the other way or actively assisting them. Did you contact one of those organizations? Maybe someone he pissed off? Did you set him up?"

"What? No."

"You didn't orchestrate the attack on your wedding?"

"And why would I want to do that?" I snap.

My calm is fading as memories pour through my mind. Damian isn't sloppy, which means he already knows every detail of what happened in that church. He's questioning me like this, forcing me to relive it all, because he wants to watch me break.

He's hoping some hidden truth will spill out when I do.

I feel Hale's fingertips brush my shoulder, both a warning and a reassurance. His father's eyes narrow on his son, hardening with suspicion, and I brush Hale's hand away. I need to deal with this on my own. If he goes up against his father, I don't know how it will end, but I'm scared to find out.

"Perhaps you wanted to kill your own father." Damian focuses his attention on me again, a hard gleam in his eyes. "Perhaps the wedding was a setup for him all along."

"No! I wouldn't do that. I loved my father. I told you, I don't know any—"

"It's all right, Grace." Damian shakes his head. "He's dead now. You can tell me what you know."

My heartbeat stutters.

I register the words a few seconds after he says them, my mind not wanting to wrap itself around the cruelty. I see a flash of red at the same moment Hale growls and strides forward, his body coming between me and Damian again as if to protect me. I thought the wound of my father's death and the secrets that've been unearthed since then was starting to heal—but in the space of a few minutes, Damian has left me raw and bleeding. Exposed.

"She doesn't know anything. I've asked her all of this already, and I'm satisfied with her answers." Hale's body seems to swell with anger. "So back the fuck off."

I can only see part of Damian's face with his son standing between us. A flare of his nostrils is the

only betrayal of emotion on his face. Whether he's feeling anger, shock, or regret, I have no idea.

As his words settle into my mind, I have a vivid memory of Hale once saying something eerily similar.

"It's okay, Grace, he's dead now. You can talk."

Hale once questioned me with the same casual cruelty his father is demonstrating now. Deliberately poking at tender places in my heart, trying to unearth the information he wanted. But his posture now is angry and defensive, and I don't know what to do with that. He stepped in front of me without hesitation, shielding me with his own body to protect me from his father's words, as if he would take a bullet for me.

"I've questioned her on multiple occasions," Hale continues, "and I would be absolutely fucking shocked if she had something to do with this." He leans on the desk and lowers his face to eye-level with his father's. "If I were you, I would be more concerned about finding the mole in your *own* syndicate."

Damian's jaw twitches as he glances from his son to me. His eyes are hard, and it feels like his gaze penetrates right through my skin—all the way down to my heart as the poor organ thrashes against my ribs.

I do my best to stay still and calm, even as nerves prickle through me. I don't know what he sees in my expression, or in Hale's. Does he know what's happened between us? Has he guessed?

And if he *does* know, will it mean my salvation? Or my death?

ZAID

CIRO SWITCHES between clenching his fingers nervously and rapping his knuckles against his thighs as he stares into space. The tattoos on his hands flex with the movement, and I stare at them to distract myself from wondering what the hell is going on behind that door.

My friend started with tattoos when he was young. I'd see him one day, and the next, he'd show up with a whole new piece on his arm or his shoulder. Most of them are from before he was taken captive for several months, but he's gotten a few since then. It's one of the only times he's let someone touch him. Ciro is twitchy about things like that, but weirdly, the pain of a tattoo must override whatever other discomfort he feels when a person gets too close to him.

Tearing my gaze from Ciro, I glance over at Lucas, who sits across from me. He immediately looks up, and I swear I can practically hear his fucking thoughts.

Is she gonna be okay?

Fuck, I wish I knew the answer to that. Damian is a reasonable man, but he's not a sentimental one. There's no fucking way he'll cut Grace slack just because her father was once an important player in the Novak Syndicate.

Especially not since Samuel Weston betrayed Damian's brother.

Lucas lets out a long breath. I do the same without thinking, as if we're mirror images of each other. We sit in complete silence, straining to hear anything from the other side of the door and waiting for the meeting to end. None of us says a word—not just out of respect for the people on the other side of the door, but also because none of us can think of anything to say.

It stung like a bitch to be kicked out, slighted like that by Damian. He trusts his son, which means he trusts us, but apparently not as much as I thought. I'm glad as fuck that Hale stayed behind with her, but *I* wanted to be there by Grace's side, ready to protect her. To defend her.

I know that Hale cares for Grace, no matter how fucked up in the head he is about all of this. He'll keep her safe. But with every second that ticks by, my body grows more stiff.

Shit, I hate *waiting*.

I hate being out here where I can't see her, where I can't anticipate harm coming her way—verbally or physically. I want to be by her side, even if she doesn't trust me. I want to prove to her that my priority now is to protect her.

“So back the fuck off.”

Hale's raised voice filters through from the other side of the door. It's the first sound I've heard since we got kicked out.

I glance over at my brother, then at Ciro, my hands clenching into fists. We all know Hale respects

and loves his old man, and to hear him speak with such fury toward his father means that Damian overstepped somewhere.

But for Damian to overstep...

Fuck, what the hell is going on in there?

“Shit,” Lucas mutters, glancing at the door.

All three of us seem to decide at the same moment that we can't just sit around anymore. I stand at the same time Lucas does, and Ciro is right behind us. I take a step toward the door with my brother and friend flanking me, waiting for the slightest hint of a raised voice. If shit goes sideways in there, Hale will need us. Grace will need us.

And we'll deal with the fallout afterward.

But before we have to decide whether to disobey a direct order from Damian and re-enter the room, the office door opens. All three of us stand to attention immediately, waiting for our command.

“Come in.”

Hale jerks his head, holding the door open for us. His expression is calm, but a muscle in his jaw ripples as he clenches his teeth.

We file in one by one, resuming our earlier positions behind Grace, and I'm instantly relieved now that I can see her. I have to fight to keep my gaze on the back wall of the room as I'm trained to do, *not* on her.

Is she okay?

My self-control is weak as fuck, and I glance down at her, assessing her posture. She remains seated in her chair, neck stiff and back straight, but Hale leans his body against the desk, looking at his father. By the glare on his face, it's clear that Damian's feathers have been ruffled as well.

I curse inwardly. It's one thing for Hale to be on edge, but both of them?

Whatever went down in here while we were outside, I don't think it's resolved. At least, not fully.

The tension between the two is strange, uncomfortable. Hale and his father are two parts of a well-oiled machine, working together in harmony. Damian trusts his son more than he trusts his own men, rare for the mafia. Rarer still, Damian respects and *loves* his son. He's never felt threatened by Hale or jealous of him, as other syndicate leaders have been with their first-born.

Hale returns the sentiment—he's always been close to his father. While others plot to bring down their family members for their own personal gain and power, Hale would lay down his life to defend his father in an instant. His mother died a long time ago, and he's aware that one day his father's job will become his, but until it does, Hale's support goes to Damian and Damian only. He's in no rush to rise to power.

Damian snaps out of contemplation, turning to us instead, and Hale pulls away from the desk. Like a restless wolf, he doesn't sit down, keeping his body angled in front of Grace's as if to shield her from his father.

It's okay. It's a good fucking thing we're all looking out for her, I tell myself, feeling a flare of jealousy at his defensive posture.

I've never been jealous of my friend. Jealousy makes you stupid, and it won't get you anywhere but dead in our world. But in moments like these, I wish like fuck that I had the power to stand up to Damian and not end up with a bullet between my eyes.

“My apologies for keeping you in the dark,” Damian begins, directing the comment toward Lucas, Ciro, and myself. His voice has calmed, as well as his posture. “I know you've been a part of this mission from the beginning, but I needed to see where my son stood in all of this.”

He shoots a pointed look toward Hale, and Hale doesn't say anything. I'm not sure if Damian

found the answer he wanted, but nothing is betrayed in his face.

“I’ve always done my best to make sure innocent people don’t get caught up in our business,” the syndicate head says, his gaze lingering on Grace. She doesn’t flinch under his stare. “Despite the danger of our line of work, despite the fact that some may disagree with our ways of making a profit, honor can exist even in a life of violence and crime.”

He purses his lips, sweeping his gaze around the room. “You’ve all been part of my organization long enough to know that I don’t stand for violence where there is no need for violence. You also know that people who defy that rule find themselves... on the wrong side of a bullet.”

We all know what he’s talking about. There are people who want to join the syndicate because they think that by becoming one of us, they’ll get free access to drugs and weapons. They want to abuse that power. And Damian’s right. Our business may be organized crime, but we hold ourselves to a certain degree of decorum. Those who disrespect those rules find themselves exactly as he said—dead.

I don’t envy the bastard who finds himself on the wrong side of Damian’s wrath.

“So,” he continues. “I will allow that there’s a possibility Grace didn’t know anything about her father’s plans or dealings. Both recently and in the past.”

I break my resolute training for the second time tonight and look at Grace again, trying to read how she takes this information. She does her best to keep her face impassive, but her shoulders slump in relief with the news, her body betraying her.

Thank fuck. I let out my own breath of relief for her sake. For my sake.

I don’t know how I would have reacted had the verdict been different.

Stupidly, most likely.

“Why Samuel betrayed Landon, and whether or not he was still involved in the criminal underworld up until his death will continue to be investigated until we find answers.” Damian’s eyes narrow as he cocks his head at Grace. “Just because I’m not blaming you for your father’s actions, that doesn’t mean I can just let you go.”

We all knew this answer was coming. Grace was prepared for it, but she still jerks as if she’s been hit. My chest tightens, and I suddenly wish like hell that she’d taken me and my brother up on our veiled offer to let her go. We might’ve paid for it with our lives, but at least she’d be safe.

What will he do with her? We’ve got safe houses spread throughout the city, so he could send her to one of those. But the thought of Grace being under the protection and control of anyone besides the four of us makes my blood boil.

Calm the fuck down, Zaid.

Grace draws out the possessive animal within me, the primal instinct to protect. I know she can hold her own, but our world is vicious. I don’t want to leave her alone among the goddamn wolves.

Damian gestures toward us, his gaze still fixed on Grace. “As a compromise, you may stay under the protection and custody of my son and his men until we figure out what happened at your wedding and who the other group of attackers were.”

Thank God.

Every set of eyes turns to her, assessing her response. The only sign of her own emotions is the way she squeezes her eyes shut for a second, swallowing slowly. Then, with a deep breath, she pushes her shoulders back and looks Damian straight in the eye.

“Thank you,” she says. “Thank you for dealing with me fairly. If my father betrayed you, he betrayed me too. He lied to me and kept secrets from me, and believe me, I want to know the truth as much as you do.”

Damian inclines his head in acceptance of her words. There's a hint of sympathy in his dark eyes. "As long as I find no evidence that you betrayed my syndicate, you will be taken care of, kept safe. But you can never go back to your old life, Grace."

"I know." She keeps her chin raised, her voice steady. "I knew that from the beginning."

But that doesn't make it any easier to swallow now.

Pride blooms in my chest as I watch her stand and turn to Hale. She's already been through a lot of bullshit in her life, but she's never let it break her. She may not like Damian's answer, but she's not going to let that change her course.

"May we leave now?" She directs the question to Hale, not his father.

Hale's lips twitch, and I see a flash of pride in his eyes too. Grace hasn't been in our world for over six years, but she's a fucking natural at the politics of power. In a subtle way, she just showed Damian that she's looking to his son for guidance through all of this, that she'll defer to Hale's judgement, not Damian's.

"Yeah. We're good."

"I look forward to seeing you again, Grace," Damian says as a parting word.

Hale gestures the way out, and as we make our way back down the hall, something lightens in my chest.

I was worried for Grace when we brought her into this meeting, but to be honest, I was selfishly worried for myself too. For my brother. For Hale and Ciro. We've become so fucking attached to the woman with the gorgeous hazel eyes and honey-blond hair that I don't think any of us would have coped well with her loss.

Still, as relieved as I am about this outcome, I know she's not happy about it. And how can she be? She's not our guest, free to come and go as she pleases. As long as she's in our home, she'll be there because she has to be, not by choice.

I glance over at her by my side, giving her a reassuring smile that she can't see.

I promise I'll make things better, Grace, I vow silently. I promise I'll fucking fix this.

Because as much as I want this beautiful, fierce woman in our lives, I want her there by choice.

I want her to choose us.

GRACE

BLOOD RUSHES in my ears like a roar.

The men usher me out of the building, retracing the path we took to reach Damian's office. We're walking down the same hallways we traversed not that long ago, but somehow, everything and nothing has changed.

I may no longer be considered a prisoner. But under the protection of Hale and his friends, I'm still a captive.

I know I shouldn't have expected to be let free after meeting with Damian, but a foolish part of me hoped for it. Zaid said something in the kitchen the night Brian was killed that made me think he and Lucas would look the other way if I tried to run again—that they'd let me go if that's what I wanted. But I couldn't accept the opening they gave me, because it could've gotten them killed.

And it probably would've gotten me killed too, in the end. I've seen firsthand the lengths Damian will go to, how determined he can be in the pursuit of someone who's betrayed him. If I ran, I'd never be safe.

Not even witness protection would prevent him from finding me. Though Damian may be willing to accept—for now—that I had nothing to do with my father's actions, I still know too much about his organization to ever be released into "normal" life, completely free of their watch.

For the rest of my life, I'll be tied to the Novak Syndicate.

As I slide into the back seat of the car between Lucas and Zaid, the smallest flicker of relief washes through me. *Did I even want a different outcome?*

As ashamed as I am to even think about it, I don't know if I truly wanted to leave. How would I have reacted if Damian tried to put me under the protection and control of someone else, rather than Hale and his friends?

How would I have moved on if I had been set free?

I expect Hale to get in behind the wheel, but instead, Ciro takes the driver's seat. Hale doesn't even get into the car.

"You're not coming with us?" I ask.

"I have business with my father. I'll see you back at the house."

He taps the top of the car once, then steps back as Zaid rolls up the window. As Ciro pulls out of the alleyway, we leave Hale behind in the darkness, consumed by fog and shadows.

The drive through Chicago's lamp-lit streets seems different somehow, even though I try to remind myself that nothing much has changed in the wake of Damian's verdict. I'll continue living with the four men, just like I have been. On the surface, my situation now is exactly the same as it was this

morning.

But it feels so much different.

Because now it's permanent.

"You know," Zaid says slowly, glancing down at me. I know he can sense my change in mood, and he's just trying to lighten things up. But honestly, I'm too tired for any of it. I don't want to be cheered up. I want my warm bed back at home. Sleep. Oblivion. "Maybe this will just be like old times."

I jerk my gaze toward his, catching a smirk on his lips.

"Remember that time Camilla and Samuel had to go out of town and you stayed with us?" Lucas says, drawing my attention. "The one where we—"

"Gave drugs to a minor?" I interrupt, cocking an eyebrow. "Yeah, I remember that time."

Despite the heaviness in my stomach, a small smile creeps across my face at the memory. My dad and mom had left town on mafia business, and somehow it was arranged that I would stay with the Novak family for the weekend.

I had wanted to go with my parents so badly. They were headed to New York, and I couldn't understand why I wasn't allowed to go. So the twins ended up showing up at Hale's house with Ciro, determined to cheer me up.

With a joint.

"You got so fucking high," Zaid says, body brushing against mine as he chuckles.

"Yeah, because I was like, fourteen!" My cheeks heat at the memory of that night. I haven't thought about it in a long time. "I'd never smoked before. I had no idea it would hit me so hard."

"Neither did we." Lucas grins. "We took care of you though, didn't we? And you had fun?"

"Yes," I admit grudgingly, my lips curving up a little more. "And... yes."

At that age, I was too young to really question the feelings I had for the guys. I craved their attention, even then, but it hadn't turned into something stronger, more visceral. It was just fun to be the center of four guys' attention in a big-ass house. The twins always loved to have a good time, and that was back before Ciro became closed-off and passive.

"You were goofy as fuck," Lucas says. "I don't think I'd ever seen you so excited. You were in love with life and amazed by the world."

"Yeah." I swallow as memories of that night clash with my new reality. It's hard to reconcile the two. "That was before I found out how awful the world can be."

Lucas's smile dims, and on my other side, Zaid frowns. I know I've brought down the mood just when it was finally beginning to lighten, and I almost feel guilty for the pain I see in Zaid's eyes.

Silence fills the car as the neighborhood comes into view, and visions of that old freedom escape me, replaced by visions of my future. Not even reminiscing about old times is going to change the facts, the truth.

I'm still their captive. This house is still a prison.

"This doesn't have to be a bad thing. It doesn't have to be that way," Zaid murmurs as if reading my mind. "In a technical sense, in Damian's books, yes. But not to us, Grace. You're not a prisoner to us."

Ciro pulls into the garage, and I don't respond. As soon as he pulls the key from the ignition, I slide out of the car behind Lucas, then make my way out of the garage and head quickly up the stairs toward my room. I can feel them watching me as I go, and I know my brush-off has hurt them.

But what am I supposed to do?

What am I supposed to think?

Lies are still lies, no matter how prettily they're wrapped in promises.

WHERE DOES life go from here?

I stare out my bedroom window, the first time I've bothered to look in the short time that I've been here. It's dark, so I can't see anything other than the surrounding large houses buried in shrubs and private gates, and the twinkling lights of the city in the distance. Compared to being in the heart of the city, this private neighborhood is almost eerily quiet.

Will this be the view for the rest of my life?

The thought is miserable. I may not be tied to that bed anymore, but it doesn't make me any less of a prisoner. Hell, it almost makes it worse. At least tied to the bed, I had something to fuel my anger.

Being able to wander around the house and do as I please makes me feel too close to comfortable. Almost *normal*.

It makes me almost believe I could be here by choice.

The phone I stole from that woman is gone, so my contact with the outside world is limited to what I get from the guys and their connections, but is that really contact with the outside world? The mafia is its own world, so far separated from the monotonous lives of people coming and going from their jobs, marrying their sweethearts, having kids and growing old.

The life I almost had.

Would I have liked it?

I think I know the answer to that question, but the truth is too frightening to face right now.

Because the truth is, I could be here by choice. If I just let go.

The back of my neck prickles, and I glance toward the doorway.

"Shit!" I jump, bracing myself on the window sill.

Ciro leans against the door frame, watching me. He crept in so quietly I didn't hear, and when he sees my wide eyes, he mutters a soft apology, grimacing. When he backs away, turning as if to leave, I step forward.

"No, please." I'm sick of being alone. My thoughts are a goddamn merry-go-round, and I want off this fucking ride. "Did you need something?"

Not answering, he steps hesitantly into the room, moving to sit on the bed. I stay at the window sill, watching him with wariness. I know he wouldn't come up here without a purpose, but I also know what usually happens when Ciro and I are alone.

Bad things.

Dangerous things.

You understand me.

It's a different type of thing than it is with any of the other guys, a different type of danger. This is an emotional danger, a danger of being sucked into his dark little world in hopes of healing him, letting him heal me in the process. It's not like Hale, a burning, maddening passion. It's not like the twins, a flirtatious temptation. It's different. Unique to just Ciro.

I swallow away the emotion that rises in my throat. He has a strange way of sensing when I need someone to be there. Even if he's not talking, he knows how to listen.

"I know..." He hesitates, swallowing. His fingers tap out a rhythm on the mattress, and he watches them instead of me. "I know what it's like to feel trapped."

Curiosity blooms in my chest, but I don't trust myself to ask questions. He'll talk if he's ready, I just have to wait for him. The fact that he's even opening up to me is huge for him, and I know pushing

him for information is only going to push him away.

“A while after you left, there was an upstart gang who was giving us trouble,” he says, his voice emotionless. “It was supposed to be in and out. We didn’t think they were so strong, so well-established already. But they were. They didn’t have much in the way of resources, but they had a leader who was ruthless and smart as hell.”

My feet carry me to the bed without thought, and I sit down next to him. I want to crawl onto his lap and wrap my arms around him, but I resist. Instead, I keep a reasonable distance between us, staring at my feet and listening.

Not looking.

Not touching.

Letting him have the space he needs to speak freely.

“They...” I hesitate. “They took you.”

It’s not a question so much as it is a thought spoken out loud. I’ve slowly been piecing together theories, bits of information I’ve picked up that support this conclusion. After the incident in the car when I pushed him too far and Hale hauled me out into the woods, I learned not to be so stupid as to ask questions. But I still caught hints of what happened. Filling in the blanks, it’s easy to guess now.

Ciro nods. I catch the movement in my periphery.

“They tortured me,” he says quietly. “Wanted me to give up what I knew about the Novak Syndicate. They knew I was high enough up on that ladder to know a lot. They tried to break me, but I didn’t let them. I learned to shut it out.”

My heart twists. *Just like you’re still shutting everything out.*

“It’s hard to go back to normal after something like that.”

His words are blank. Empty. Just a statement of fact, unattached from the pain that should accompany words like that. He rubs the tattoos on his knuckles without realizing it, drawing my attention to the design.

He didn’t have those tattoos when I left. He got them sometime in the intervening years, and I wonder if they were inked on his skin after his rescue from the gang that captured him.

“Ciro,” I murmur quietly, trying to keep my own voice even like his is. I worry that any show of emotion will upset him, but it’s hard to keep my feelings under control. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. No one should have to go through that.”

I don’t need him to tell me the details. I can guess at parts of it, and I have a feeling there are parts I’m not emotionally equipped to hear about.

There are aspects of what he’s been through that *he* might not even remember. Like he said—he’s learned to shut it out. I may not know exactly what he’s been through, but after everything I’ve been through, I can begin to understand the battle he fights every single day. The battle he fights with his mind, with the memories.

He can’t run from what happened to him. It will always be there, no matter how much he tries to hide.

The repercussions of his torture will last forever.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he says quietly. He turns his head a little, looking at my feet instead of his own. “I don’t need you to feel sorry for me. I just wanted you to know... I understand what it’s like. To wish you could change things. To feel trapped.”

Anger burns through me, consuming my body and filling my veins.

Anger for his sake. Anger against the people who did this to him, anger for the person they took away—the quiet, bookish boy I once knew. Ciro was always steady, but now he teeters on the edge,

fighting a battle every single day that none of us will ever understand.

My heart breaks, the pieces catching in my throat and stomach, making it hard to breathe.

“Ciro...”

I say his name again, because I don't know what the fuck else to say.

Those steel-gray eyes meet mine, shattered and broken to their very depths.

Goddammit. I hate how much he hurts, even if he tries to hide it. I hate that he tore open a wound inside himself just to try to make me feel better, to let me know I'm not alone.

But I love him for it a little bit too.

I can't help myself. I should keep the wall up between us, for both his sake and mine.

But fucking hell, I *can't*.

So I lean forward and press my lips to his.

CIRO

WHEN GRACE'S lips touch mine, my body jerks back, flinching away from the touch on instinct.

Ever since I was captured, all touch has been unwelcome. My fight-or-flight instinct exists on steroids now, on a hair-trigger and out of my control.

My heart protests, urging me to pull her closer. It pounds an insistent drumbeat in my chest, and I wish I was fucking *normal* like Hale or Zaid or Lucas.

Grace stiffens too, freezing in place when she feels my response. "I'm sorry," she mutters, clearing her throat.

My jaw clenches so tightly it aches. My hands ball into fists, blunt fingernails digging into my palms. I hate the men who tortured me more than I ever have in this moment. They can have my fucking past, but I hate them for stealing my present. My future.

I'm fucked up. Broken.

I managed to step into the shower with her when she broke down the night Brian tried to kill her. In that moment, nothing mattered more than soothing Grace—not even my demons.

But now? My body is locked up, my muscles frozen and stiff as they battle the instinct to push her away or run. If she were causing me pain, I might not even notice the proximity. It's the gentleness that fucking kills me. I don't know how to handle it.

Grace doesn't pull away from me, though. She waits, lingering next to me. Her breath brushes against my lips; gentle exhalations tease the darkness inside of me, making it panic. My demons don't want to die, they don't want to be captured by the light, so they put up a bigger fight, trying to force her away.

Threat. She's a threat. Threat.

People aren't easy for me anymore, not that they ever were. I don't know how to deal with them, and I don't think they know how to deal with me. But not Grace. She somehow manages to slip between the cracks in my armor, breaking through the barriers around my heart not with violence but with patience.

I don't know how fucking long we stay like this, frozen in place with our lips almost touching. When I think about it, my heart kicks in my chest, panic swelling inside me like a tidal wave.

So I stop thinking about it. I ignore the discomfort burning through my veins like stinging acid and focus on one of my favorite things in the world—Grace's scent. It's an alluring mix of jasmine and sandalwood. As addictive as a drug, sweet and complex. Just like her.

I binge on her scent, drawing in huge lungfuls of it. And with every breath I draw, my body relaxes a little.

Maybe she senses the change in me, because she finally leans forward again, taking my lips with hers, kissing me with a tenderness that threatens to break me. It's not a passionate kiss so much as it is a comforting one—for both of us.

Threat.

I fight the thoughts creeping up my spine that make me want to push her away, the darkness that tries to force her away from me. With Grace, maybe it can be different. It doesn't have to be the same as it's been for the past few years.

With Grace, I want *more*. I want to be better.

She's soft, impossibly soft. So soft it makes my chest ache. Her gentle lips and her smooth skin, the palms of her hands and the tips of her fingers are almost too much for me, too good and pure for me.

Threat.

Something simmers beneath her kiss as she deepens it, and my cock twitches. My hands want to explore her body, touch, taste, feel, but they stay fisted on my thighs. I don't know what to do, and the panic of that realization makes me lock up again.

Threat. Get away. Threat.

I tear my lips away from hers, swallowing. My heart races inside my chest, and I fight to catch my breath, ashamed of my own weakness, my own faults.

Fuck. I was content with being broken until Grace showed up. It was all I could remember, all I knew. The person I was before I was captured was so far away, an entirely different man. I didn't even know what it meant to go back to being that person, didn't even want to try. I've grown numb to everything around me, my days blending into each other and passing quickly.

I haven't had sex since before my torture. I had no desire to even look at a woman, let alone touch one or fuck one. With Grace... dammit, I want her so much. But I'll fucking embarrass myself if I try.

My fingers curl and uncurl as I clench my jaw. Grace sighs and moves to pull away from me, and a frustrated growl pours from my throat.

She stops. "Do you not want me to go?"

I shake my head, because as fucked up as I am, I *know* I don't want that. I can't stand the thought of losing Grace.

"Do you want me to stay?"

I turn my head a fraction of an inch to meet her gaze. Then I nod, another tiny movement.

She watches me for a moment, her gaze serious. Then she stands up, leaving me sitting on the edge of the bed. My heart seems to slow, acid pumping through my veins. Of course she doesn't want to stay. She's been reaching out to me ever since we got to Chicago, being kind and sweet even though we were holding her prisoner. I've tried to let her in, tried to break down the part of myself that keeps me walled off.

But every step forward I take sends me two steps back.

I'll never be fucking normal, and she knows it.

I clench my jaw, waiting for her to tell me to leave.

The words don't come though. Instead, she moves to stand in front of me, so close that our legs are almost touching. Her soft blonde hair cascades around her face as she drops her head a little, looking down at me.

"I'm not going anywhere, *Ciro*. Not today. Not tomorrow."

Her voice is warm. I know the idea that she can never leave still hurts her, but right now, I don't hear any of that pain. Her words don't sound like a curse or plea. They sound like a promise.

I don't know what to say, so I just stare up at her. And when she drops to her knees in front of me, my gaze tracks every inch of her movement. Now I'm the one looking down at her, and the sight of her kneeling before me, her hazel eyes soft and sweet, makes my blood stir.

My cock twitches in my boxers, a pathetic attempt to wake up. It's been so fucking long that just the feel of my balls tightening makes my whole body stiffen. My breath hitches, and Grace's pink tongue darts out to lick her lips before she rests her hands on my thighs.

The heat of her palms sears me through the fabric of my pants, and my muscles go rigid beneath her touch. I clench my jaw, doing my best to stay still as she looks up at me through her lashes.

"Is this okay?"

I nod. I can't fucking speak.

A small smile curves her lips, making her look like a fucking angel. There's something else in her eyes too though. Something a lot less sweet and a lot less innocent. It calls to a part of me I've almost forgotten exists, making me want to pull her onto my lap and kiss her until her sweet arousal soaks through both her pants and mine.

But I don't move. I just watch her as she rakes her fingernails gently down my legs. The feel of it sends electric shocks through my body, and my cock twitches again, pressing against my fly as it starts to get hard.

Fuck. Oh, *fuck*.

I can't get my breath under control, and my nostrils flare as I try to keep from panting. My jaw is clenched so tight it fucking hurts as sensations overwhelm me.

"You're so handsome, *Ciro*." Grace's gaze moves up my torso and chest before finding my face. She's breathing a little harder too, her perfect chest rising and falling as her nails trace mind-blowing patterns on my legs. "Has anyone ever told you that?"

I shrug. I can barely remember my own name right now, let alone what someone else has said to me. Back before my capture, I hooked up with girls from time to time. None of them seemed to think I was unattractive, but none of them looked at me the way Grace is looking at me right now either.

A flicker of sadness moves through her eyes at my response, and she puts her hands on my knees, pressing my legs open so she can move closer to me. "Well, you are. You're one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen. Your tattoos. Your gorgeous jawline. Your lips. But more than that, it's your eyes. It's what I see inside them. It's *you*."

She's settled between my legs now, her fingers moving higher up my thighs. She leans forward and presses a kiss to my stomach through my shirt, and a low noise pours from my throat before I can stop it.

Grace looks up again, biting her lip. "Is this okay?"

I nod, swallowing hard.

With my permission, she does it again, holding on to my thighs as she peppers kisses over my stomach. I'm wearing what I usually do—a t-shirt and jeans—and I suddenly hate the thin fabric that keeps her lips from pressing against my skin. It feels like electricity is shooting through my body, and even as it burns, I want more. I crave more.

Grace hums softly, a low, contented noise, and another jolt travels straight to my cock. It's straining against my pants now, pressing painfully against my zipper as it tries to get closer to Grace. Closer to the source of everything good.

She pulls away from me a little, glancing down. Then she adjusts her position, moving backward a few inches so she can drop her head. I tense, the muscles in my neck straining as I feel the warmth of her breath on my shaft. My feet are pressing hard against the floor, my hips straining, and when she

kisses the bulge of my cock, I almost come in my pants.

I can't hide the raggedness of my breath anymore. I'm sucking in air as my hands fist the blankets at my side, and when I let out a grunt, Grace tilts her head, finding my gaze again.

"Is this okay?"

Fuck. Yes.

I nod.

"Does it feel good?"

Good isn't the right word to describe what I'm feeling right now, but I don't know what the right word is, so I just nod again. I don't want her to stop. My entire body feels like it's been turned inside out, all the emotions and sensations that usually lie dormant inside me rising up like a wave.

She kisses my shaft again, and it jumps in response, my hips jerking toward her face. She smiles, making another quiet, pleased noise. Then she continues to explore me, slowly and carefully. Keeping her movements slow and her touch gentle, she slides one hand up my thigh, using her fingers to trace the line of my cock along with her mouth.

My body shudders, precum leaking from me and soaking into my boxers. When Grace's fingers move up to the button on my jeans, she looks up at me once more. She doesn't say anything this time, but I can see the question in her eyes.

Slowly, my chin dips again, giving her permission to continue.

There's a slight tremor in her hands as she undoes my button and tugs my fly down, but it's nothing compared to the way my hips jerk and shift. I can't seem to stay still. There's too much sensation roaring through me, it won't let me.

Then her fingers brush against the bare skin of my cock, and I let out a harsh grunt. My heart crashes against my ribs as she kisses the tip, her tongue darting out to collect some of the precum that's still leaking from me.

"Grace." Her name comes almost involuntarily, like it's the only word in the English language I remember right now.

"I want to taste you, *Ciro*," she murmurs quietly, her fist wrapping around me before she licks me again. "I want to put my mouth on you. I've wanted to ever since the night you touched me, when you licked me. I want to make you feel as good as you made me feel. Will you let me?"

"Yes." It's a raspy groan, a voice I barely recognize as my own.

She drops her head lower before running her tongue all the way up the underside of my shaft. I groan, my eyes rolling back in my head. My balls are drawn up tight, my cock pulsing against the soft skin of her hand as she fists me again and wraps her lips around my head.

I'm gonna fucking embarrass myself. She's barely touched me, and I'm about to lose it. I grimace in frustration, worried my reaction to her is too much, too strong.

But when Grace looks up at me, her cheeks hollowed and her lips wrapped around my shaft, she looks dazed and pleased, her pupils blown out.

She looks like she's enjoying this.

That thought almost wrecks me, and I release the blanket, fisting her hair instead. My fingers bury themselves in her soft honey-colored locks, gripping tightly. I trap the strands between my fingers in a vise grip, but I'm careful not to pull too hard. I won't hurt her. I refuse to—not when she's giving me so much pleasure.

My hands move up and down with the motion of her head, and my hips thrust up toward her face, meeting her each time her lips slide down my cock. I'm about to come. I can feel it building inside me, the slow burn of pleasure that tightens my balls and makes my cock swell against her tongue.

I don't want to. Fuck, not yet. Not yet.

I'm not ready for this incredible pleasure to be over. It's been years since I've been touched like this, since I've let myself feel like this. And it's not the warm lips sliding over my cock that's got me so close to exploding. It's the woman on her knees in front of me, offering herself to me like I fucking deserve her.

"Grace!"

Her name bursts from my lips one more time as my hips thrust upward. Jets of cum spill from my cock as pleasure slams through me, and I feel her swallow, her lips still wrapped around my shaft. She keeps sucking and stroking me until every last drop has poured out of me, and I'm gasping for breath by the time she releases me from her mouth.

My cock is still semi-hard, glistening from her saliva, and her lips are pink and a little swollen. I unclench my fingers from her hair, and the blonde locks tumble in messy waves around her face. My heart is drumming so hard against my ribs that it hurts. Everything that just happened was a combination of pleasure and pain, of desperate desire and old wounds trying to rip me apart.

But I've never felt anything so incredible.

Grace tugs her full bottom lip between her teeth. She tucks me back into my pants before tugging up the zipper and buttoning them up again. Her touch is gentle, almost tender, and it makes me think of the way I touched her in the shower the night Brian almost killed her. I still had my clothes on, so we weren't even skin-to-skin. But all I knew in that moment was that I wanted to help her. That I wanted to make everything better for her.

Is that what she felt while she was on her knees for me?

She rises slowly to her feet, a shy smile spreading across her face. She moves to step away from me, and I don't know where she's going, but I suddenly can't bear the thought of letting her leave. Before I'm even conscious of the movement, my hand reaches out and grabs hers. I tug her back toward me, and I see her eyes widen in surprise before I pull her down onto the bed with me. I move us toward the middle of the mattress and lie down, bringing her with me and wrapping my arms around her, burying my face in her hair.

It's terrifying to touch someone this closely, our bodies pressed together from head to toe. The only other time we've done this was in the shower that night, and before that, it'd been years since I let someone get that close.

In the aftermath of the orgasm, my body is still over-sensitized and buzzing, and the feel of her soft body cradled against mine makes my heart thud heavily in my chest.

Her heart is beating hard too, I realize. Just as hard and fast as mine is. Does she feel what I do? Or anything even close to it? I press a kiss to her hair, inhaling her jasmine scent as I both offer comfort and seek it.

I don't speak, and neither does she. We just lie together, breathing each other in, until our bodies relax against each other.

The last thing I'm aware of is her small hand pressed against my chest.

GRACE

LYING NEXT TO CIRO, I feel his heart thrumming steadily beneath my palm.

As it thuds against his chest and my hand, it slowly returns to a sated, rhythmic beat as he drifts off to sleep. Though he doesn't hold me in his arms the way one of the other men might, he allows me to be close enough that his warm skin heats my own, and a small thrill of happiness spreads through me, despite my own exhaustion.

Holy fuck.

I've never been more turned on in my life, and all I did was give him a blowjob.

Brian liked when I went down on him, so I did it pretty often. But it was never something I particularly enjoyed doing.

Until tonight.

What just happened between me and Ciro was different.

I might've been on my knees in front of him, but I didn't feel weak. I felt powerful.

Not like I dominated him or anything, but like I had the power to give him something no one else could. Something he stopped even *hoping* for a long time ago.

To see him so turned on and so trusting, so desperate for me? To feel him lose control, even a little bit? It was one of the most amazing things I've ever experienced.

The fact that he even allowed me to touch him made me feel special, and the way he looked at me with worship in his eyes meant the world to me. *Means* the world to me.

I try not to squirm against the ache between my legs, not wanting to disturb him. As willing as I am to give him pleasure, I know I can't push him too far.

Ciro still has a long way to go. I'm just beginning to understand the weight of his trauma, and I'll probably never know all of it. I can try to comprehend what he's gone through, but I'm only grasping at the edges of it.

Still, I think, listening to his heart as sleep tugs at my consciousness, *at least it's a start.*

I TRY to hold up the fabric of my dress as I stumble over the pavement, but it's soaked in blood from the hem all the way up to my breasts—fresh blood that weighs the dress down and makes it wrap around my ankles. I want to tear the fucking gown off, but I can't stop for anything.

Because if I stop, I may never start again.

My strength is already failing me, but adrenaline fuels my fear, pushing me forward.

My dress snags on something, sending me tumbling to the ground with a heavy smack. Pain tears through my lungs as my palms scrape against the cement. I try to force myself back up, but another weight slams down on my body, covering me.

He's caught up with me, and he's never going to let me go.

Brian.

"Gotcha." His voice is rough, breathless from the chase. His face shines with sweat, and malice gleams in his eyes.

I fight with everything in me. I try to push him away, but he's too heavy, crushing me with his weight. He straddles me, pinning me with his large body. His hands come down on my throat before I have a chance to protest or try to convince him to let me go, strangling me. Choking the breath out of me.

"I always wanted to hear you beg," he grunts, pressing harder. He strains to hold me down, sweat dripping down his forehead and a vein bulging at his temple. "I wanted to see fear in your eyes. I wanted you to fucking suffer."

Stop.

My mouth moves, but no sound comes out. My head is spinning, the lack of oxygen making me dizzy.

He's going to kill me.

If I could still speak, I would beg. I would plead with him, I would scream at him. I would fight him.

Stop.

Please, stop.

Stop.

"Stop!" I choke out hoarsely, heart pounding as my eyes fly open.

I try to swallow away the lingering terror of the dream, but I can't. My throat is closed up tight, burning in agony as I register the weight on top of me and the hands on my throat, choking me.

The real hands.

The real weight.

Ciro.

His eyes are open but unfocused. I can see the terror locked away somewhere in them as he dreams, but it's overwhelmed by a look of sickening determination. He's lost somewhere in his head, in a night terror, not remembering me or anything we shared just hours ago.

"Ciro—"

It's meant to be a scream, but it's hardly a word at all. I can't get any air. I can't move.

"Ciro, please, you don't—"

You don't know what you're doing, I try to say, but the words are lost in the grip he has over my throat. And as if sensing the fight for life in me, he squeezes harder, pressing me deeper into the bed with his body, crushing my lungs and my stomach with his knees to my chest.

Wake up wake up wake up.

I sob silently, my throat burning. I don't know if the words make it from my thoughts to my mouth, but either way, they do no good. The pain that stems from my lungs and throat begins to rush through the rest of my body.

Darkness clouds the edges of my vision, prickled with light, but the room starts to swirl around me, fading into nothingness.

Slam!

Hale bursts in, the door rattling in its frame as it closes behind him. He runs across the darkened room toward the bed, yanking *Ciro* off me. My hands fly to my burning throat as I gasp for air. Pain tears through my lungs and throat with every inhale, but I keep sucking in oxygen anyway.

I want to scream, but nothing comes out as *Ciro* fights against Hale like a wild animal. Hale is quicker though. It probably helps that he's actually conscious. Within seconds, he has his burly friend pinned to the ground. He strains to keep *Ciro* down with his weight, pressing into him with his arms, legs, torso, and hands.

"*Ciro!*" Hale shouts, voice straining. "It's not real. It's not fucking real. *Ciro*, wake up!"

Another wave of aggression rips through the black-haired man as he thrashes and flails against Hale's grip. Hardly caring about my own safety, I scramble toward the edge of the bed, holding my throat with one hand.

Ciro. Fuck, I need to help—

"Stay away from him, Grace!" Hale warns, grabbing *Ciro's* wrists and pinning them to the floor.

Seconds that feel like hours pass as I watch in horror. My stomach twists as I realize that this has happened before—more than just once or twice. Otherwise, Hale wouldn't know what to do. He waits it out patiently, straining with everything in him, holding his friend down, murmuring something in a low voice. I can't hear what it is; the quiet sounds are drowned out by the rush of blood in my ears.

Slowly, like ice melting, *Ciro* comes to.

After witnessing what I just saw, I didn't think anything could be worse, but I was wrong.

This is worse.

Ciro's entire body shudders. He's shaking and panting like a wild animal. All the color leaves his face as if someone's draining his blood. His eyes slowly clear, the pupils expanding until the *Ciro* I know re-emerges, trapped under his friend's body. Sensing the change, Hale hesitantly pulls away, dragging himself off *Ciro* but staying close enough to lunge at him if the night terror starts again.

Ciro wipes the back of his hand over his mouth, still gasping for breath.

But it isn't until those steely gray eyes meet mine that everything in him seems to shatter a second time—and this time, I break with him. Like an arrow piercing my heart, I feel his gaze scan the column of my throat where his hands have made imprints, and pure self-hatred floods his expression.

He knows exactly what he just did to me.

He can see the evidence of it on my pale skin.

I slip off the bed without thinking, stumbling over to him, desperate to help him. But as I reach out for him to tell him that I'm fine, he scrambles away, dragging himself along the floor.

"Stay away from me!" he shouts hoarsely, pulling into himself until his back presses up against the wall.

I pursue him, but Hale stops me with a firm but gentle hand around my wrist.

"Don't, Grace," he says in a low voice. He sounds almost as wrecked as *Ciro*.

Tears blur my vision, and as the droplets spill over my eyelids, I realize my cheeks are already wet. I was crying when I woke up, and now I can't seem to stop.

I know Hale is just trying to help, but I can't stand that it's this way, can't stand that neither of them trust me to be near *Ciro*.

"You didn't hurt me," I plead, turning back to *Ciro* as choked sobs clog my aching throat. Hale releases his grip on my wrist, but his hand slides down to grasp mine. He pulls me back, telling me with a silent shake of his head that it's useless. But I refuse to give up. "Please, let me help—"

"Stay away from me." I don't know the person who stares at me from the other side of the room,

pressed up against the wall. "*Stay away.*"

I don't recognize the man whose whole body shakes as he holds his wrists against his body, as if trying to keep himself from doing it again. His eyes churn and his jaw clenches, all of the peace we felt together replaced by acidic tension.

Running his hands through his black hair, Ciro tugs at the roots. He's not looking at me anymore, just staring off into space. His knee bounces, his chest heaves, and I can practically see the thoughts flashing through his head.

It's like he's afraid of himself again. Like he thinks this is what he gets for trying to heal, to have something good, to let himself go for a little while.

It's like he thinks if he touches me... he'll break me.

GRACE

I STARE DOWN at Ciro with tears burning my eyes.

How did shit get so messed up, so quickly? I don't know what time it is, but it can't have been more than a few hours ago that I was on my knees in front of this man, worshipping him with my mouth while he looked at me like I was the most incredible thing he'd ever seen.

He didn't hold back with me. He let himself feel good, let himself enjoy it. And in the aftermath, he held me like he'd never let me go.

Now he's pressed up against the wall like he'd disappear through it if he could. Like he's a prisoner in a cage—and in a way, he is. Whatever demons lurk in his mind, whispering lies about the kind of person he is and the kind of pain he deserves, they hold him prisoner just as surely as the walls of whatever room he was held captive in once did.

And every time he tries to break free, they drag him back down again.

I hate it.

My jaw clenches, anger at what Ciro's had to go through overwhelming me in a hot rush. I see his body stiffen along with mine, and I force myself to take a breath. He's responding to my energy, and the fury I'm feeling right now isn't helping anyone—especially not Ciro, who struggles enough with violence as it is.

He needs gentleness.

Calm.

Warmth.

He needs all of the things he keeps trying to push away, and I don't care if he doesn't think he's worthy, I'm going to give them to him anyway.

I'm afraid to try to touch him right now though. Afraid it'll hurt him more than he's already been hurt. My throat still aches a little, and I'm guessing I'll have some bruising on my fair skin tomorrow—hell, maybe the marks are already visible—but that's the least of my concerns right now.

As Ciro closes his eyes, his whole body shuddering, I glance at Hale, a helpless plea in my expression. I want to make this better, but I don't know what to do. He's Ciro's best friend, and I hope like hell that he'll have some idea how to ease the broken man's agony.

Hale is still sitting on the floor in the spot where he pinned Ciro down earlier. His knees are bent, his elbows resting on them as his head bows slightly. He looks exhausted and sad, but when he meets my gaze, he nods.

He pushes to his feet and walks over to me, helping me up with a gentle grip on my arms. He leads me over to the bed and sits me down on the edge of the mattress. I'm wearing the same clothes I

fell asleep in, a soft sweater and a pair of jeans, and my sweater got twisted around my body a little as I struggled with Ciro.

As he straightens out the fabric, I glance over Hale's shoulder to see Ciro watching us with a blank, haunted stare. Almost as if Hale can feel that stare, he speaks to his friend.

"She's okay. Grace is okay. See?"

Ciro shakes his head, his fists clenching. His knees are up by his chest, his back against the wall, and his dark hair is wild and untamed from his fingers.

"I'll check on her, all right?" Hale's voice is even and calm. There's no anger or frustration in his tone, just boundless patience. "What do you want me to do, Ciro?"

"Check her neck," the man across the room rasps.

I wasn't even sure he would answer, and a little bubble of hope rises up in me at the fact that he did.

Hale sits down next to me, his knee brushing against mine as he uses one hand to tilt my chin a little. The fingertips of his other hand move softly over my neck, feeling the contours of my throat and checking for painful areas. I can feel a few sore spots, but I don't jump or wince as he touches them.

"A little bruising," Hale says, his voice pitched loud enough for Ciro to hear. "No swelling. Nothing too bad." He glances over at his friend. "You held back. I've seen what you can do when you want to hurt someone. Even in your sleep, even in a nightmare, you didn't want to hurt Grace."

Ciro doesn't respond to that. His lips press together as he swallows, then he says quietly, "Check for scratches. The back of her neck. Her shoulders."

"Okay." Hale moves my chin the other way, then releases it to run his fingers over the back of my neck, moving my hair out of the way. He slides them over my shoulders and along my collarbones, examining my skin as he does. "There are a few spots on her shoulders, but they're light."

Ciro's hands curl into fists again, as if he wishes he could break his own fingers for hurting me. Self-recrimination fills his features as he shifts his gaze from Hale to me and back again. "Are there any other bruises? Anywhere else?"

Hale's blue eyes find mine as his hands move down to the hem of my shirt. "May I?"

I nod, lifting my arms up to let him pull it over my head. Goose bumps scatter across my skin as I feel both men's gazes move across my skin. I try to stay perfectly still as Hale moves his hands over my ribs and the dip of my waist, but I'm deeply conscious of the way Ciro's gaze tracks the movement.

Hale really is his surrogate, I realize. He's doing what Ciro wishes he could do, touching me without fear or worry.

The thought makes my heart ache a little, even as my nipples pebble at the sensation of Hale's calloused palms sliding over my skin. He looks at the man in front of me, watching as he examines me with focus and concentration, and a sudden rush of emotion wells up inside me. There are too many feelings for me to identify each one, but tears sting my eyes again as they threaten to overwhelm me.

"Where else would you touch me, Ciro?" I murmur. My voice is quiet, but I know he hears me. "If you could. Where would you touch me? How would you touch me?"

Ciro blinks at me. He looks shocked, his gray eyes wide. When my gaze flits back to Hale, I see surprise in his eyes too.

Honestly, I'm surprised myself. I don't know exactly where my words came from, but I know that this moment feels like a crossroads. What happens in the next few minutes will affect all of our lives. And if I let Ciro leave this room thinking that he can never touch me again, that I don't *want* him to touch me, I'm sure he never will. He's kept himself locked up so tightly for so long that if he retreats

back into himself now, I don't think he'll ever get out.

I can't let that happen.

I don't know what will play out between me and the men who kidnapped me, or what my future holds. But in this moment, it doesn't matter. I refuse to let *Ciro's* demons win. I can't fix him, I know that. But maybe I can keep him from shutting the door and locking the world out entirely.

"Hale would never hurt me, would he?" I ask, looking over at *Ciro*.

He shakes his head, looking at me like I'm crazy for even suggesting it.

I nod, holding his gaze as I lick my lips. "So tell Hale how you would touch me. He'll do whatever you tell him to. And you'll see that it doesn't hurt."

Hale shifts on the bed beside me, making a low noise. I glance at him, braced for him to tell me that this is insane and he's not going to play my game. But when our eyes meet, he holds my gaze steadily, something like gratitude passing through his expression. Maybe he can see how close to the brink his friend is too. Maybe he wants to help just like I do.

For a long moment, the room is utterly quiet. *Ciro* is still watching the two of us, and I'm painfully aware of every heartbeat that passes as I wait to see if he'll speak. When he finally does, his voice is raspy, as if he has to force the words past unwilling vocal chords.

"Her hand."

Hale doesn't hesitate. He lifts my hand, interlacing his fingers with mine. *Ciro* didn't tell him what to do with it, but he doesn't hesitate. He brings my hand to his lips and kisses each of my fingertips gently.

Little sparks dance through me as his lips meet my skin, and I do my best to keep my muscles loose and pliant. I don't want *Ciro* to see me tense up and assume I'm trying to resist.

"Her wrist," he grates out.

My nerves tingle as Hale turns my hand over, exposing the delicate skin of my wrist. He presses a kiss to it, and my chest rises as I draw in a breath and hold it. He's put his mouth on much more intimate parts of me, but something about this small gesture hits me right in the chest.

His blue eyes meet mine as his lips leave my skin, and I can see something in them that tells me this is no longer just about *Ciro*. It's about me and Hale too. Maybe even about all three of us.

As if he can't stop himself now, *Ciro* tells Hale to touch my forearm, my shoulder, my neck, my ear—and each time Hale follows his friend's directives, I shiver under his touch.

Their touch.

Ciro is the one guiding this, but Hale is the one carrying it out. And as his hands move over my body, becoming more and more greedy, I feel like I'm somehow being touched by both men.

"Her lips. Kiss her."

There's a crack in *Ciro's* voice as he says the words, and I know that even though he's not the one sitting next to me, he's imagining just what my lips feel like.

Hale hesitates for just a second. Then his hand threads through my hair, palming the back of my head as he kisses me. His tongue sweeps the seam of my lips, and all three of us groan as I open to him, allowing him to take it even deeper. The bruises on my neck ache a little as my tongue clashes with Hale's, my body straining toward his as he wraps his free arm around my waist and pulls me closer.

The reminder of what *Ciro* did to me, of why Hale and I are doing what we're doing, only urges me on. I rise up onto my knees so I can face Hale more fully, taking his face between my hands as we kiss like this might be the last fucking time we get to.

"Her bra. Take off her bra," *Ciro* commands, and Hale is reaching for the clasp before the words

are even all the way out of his friend's mouth. He tugs the straps down my arm and tosses my bra away. His hands cup my breasts, thumbs grazing my nipples until they're peaked and hard beneath his touch. He clamps them between his knuckles and tugs, and Hiro lets out a tortured noise.

As Hale drops his head to lick and kiss his way down my chest, I cling to his hair, arching my back as I look over and meet Hiro's gaze.

The man with the gorgeous tattoos and the haunted soul is standing now, still pressed against the wall but on his feet. He's hard again, his cock thrusting against the confines of his pants just like it did earlier when I knelt before him. His entire focus is zeroed in on everywhere Hale touches me, and when I let out a needy whimper, his gaze flies to my face.

"It feels so good," I murmur, my toes curling as my pussy clenches. "Where else do you want to touch me, Hiro? What else do you want?"

"Take her pants off."

Hiro reaches down to squeeze his cock as he speaks, like he's trying to ease some of the pressure building inside him. Hale growls, and a second later, his arms band around my waist. He picks me up before setting me down on my back, and as soon as my body hits the mattress, he's moving lower, his skilled hands going to the waistband of my pants before tugging my fly open. He drags my jeans down my legs, and cool air hits the damp fabric of my panties.

Going down on Hiro turned me on, and even though I've slept for several hours since then, my body is still alert and needy, keyed up and hungry. My legs move restlessly on the bed until Hale grabs my thighs and spreads them apart, opening me wide for him as he kneels between my legs. He's gazing down at my pussy, ravenous heat in his eyes, but then he just... stops.

Still pinning my legs to the bed so he can see all of me, he waits, his fingers digging lightly into the flesh of my thighs.

"Hiro!" I gasp, shifting my hips as much as I can under Hale's tight hold. "He won't—until you tell him—please!"

My skin is on fire. My whole body is on fire. The slight burn in my thighs as Hale presses them wide open only makes the insistent throbbing in my clit more intense. I need more.

But Hale won't give it to me until Hiro says the word.

Breathing hard, I cup my breasts, playing with my nipples as I turn my head to look at Hiro. His hand is working against the thick bulge in his pants even harder and faster now, and the sight of him jerking himself off like this makes my breath catch.

I have a sudden vivid memory of the night Hale made me come with his sinfully talented fingers, trying to prove a point to Zaid and to punish us both—and maybe himself too.

But that's not what he's doing this time.

This time, he's giving us all what we need.

"What do you want?" My eyes burn as I stare at Hiro, willing him to let himself have this. To take what he wants for once. To trust himself. "Please. Tell me."

He swallows. His large hand, covered in swirling ink, delves below the waistband of his pants. His eyelids droop as he squeezes himself, and then his pupils flare as he meets my gaze.

"I want you, Grace. I want to fuck you. I want to... to have you."

"Fuck," Hale mutters. His voice is strained, thick with lust, and I don't know if it's from hearing Hiro admit he wants to fuck me or from holding himself back like he has been. But it doesn't really matter.

Hiro told us what he would do if he could touch me. And I intend to give him what he wants.

Pressing up onto my elbows, I reach for Hale's shirt, tugging at the hem until he finally lets go of

my legs long enough to let me pull it off. He's already working on his pants, the last of his self-restraint fading as the tension between all of us reaches a boiling point. As soon as he's naked, he hooks his hands under my knees and drags me toward him. He slides my panties off and hurls them away as his hungry gaze lands on my aching pussy.

Just like he did before, he presses my legs open. But this time, the movement is slow and deliberate, so full of promise that it makes me shiver with anticipation.

I know what he's doing.

He's putting me on display.

Not just for himself, but for *Ciro*. He's letting *Ciro* see all of me.

My legs press against *Hale's* hard grip as arousal seeps from me. It's almost too much, having them both look at me like this.

Hale's cock is hard, and he slides through my folds without entering me, teasing me until I'm squirming beneath him.

"Do you want me, *Grace*?" he demands in a rough voice. "Do you want *Ciro*?"

"Yes," I pant, so desperate with need that I'll beg if he wants me to. "Yes. Please. Fuck. Please!"

But *Hale* doesn't make me beg. His thick cock finds my entrance, and he thrusts into me in one hard motion. I cry out, arching my back as the sudden feeling of fullness overwhelms me. As he draws out slowly, I look over at *Ciro*, my heart thundering in my chest.

"Let me see you too. I want to see you."

He hesitates for a second, then unbuttons and unzips his pants, shoving them down enough to free his cock. He wraps his hand around his shaft again, and the sight of him fucking his fist while *Hale* fucks me makes me whimper with pleasure.

They match each other's strokes perfectly, falling into sync as if they really are the same person. My breasts bounce with each hard thrust as *Hale* drives into me, and the low grunts that emanate from both him and *Ciro* are the hottest sounds I think I've ever heard.

"Turn her over," *Ciro* finally orders as an orgasm builds low in my belly. He locks gazes with me, issuing the command to me too. "On your hands and knees."

Hale doesn't miss a beat, pulling out of me and grabbing my hips as I scramble to comply. I've barely gotten my arms and legs under me before he yanks me backward, impaling me on his cock again. His hips slap against mine as he picks up his pace, and I turn my head, panting as I watch *Ciro* stroke himself hard and fast.

"Come, *Ciro*," I whisper, my words broken up by the sharp movement of *Hale's* thrusts. "Come with me. It feels so fucking good."

I can barely get any breath behind my words, so I don't know if he hears me or not. But maybe he doesn't need to. With a loud grunt, he comes all over his hand, and the sight of it pushes me over the edge. I clench hard around *Hale* as the orgasm rips through me, and like the last domino falling, he drives into me and spills his release.

Hale and I collapse forward a little from the force of his last thrust, and he grinds his hips against my ass as his cock twitches inside me. My whole body is shaking as if a dam has just broken inside me, flooding my veins with adrenaline. A light sheen of sweat covers my body, and if my throat still hurts, I can't feel it anymore. I can't feel anything except the lingering waves of pleasure from my orgasm and *Hale's* warm body draped over mine.

With a groan, he pulls out of me and collapses on the mattress beside me, one arm reaching out to pull me close. I let him draw me toward him, looking across the empty space of the room to where *Ciro* sags against the wall. He looks utterly spent, like that orgasm dragged out a piece of his soul,

and he's still fisting his dick with wet, sticky fingers.

He meets my gaze, and for just a moment, I don't think I see the self-recrimination that clouded his eyes earlier. He looks almost peaceful.

Unwrapping his hand from his dick, he presses away from the wall. There's a box of tissues on the nightstand by the bed, and I watch as he slowly walks over and grabs a few to clean himself up. He tosses them in the trash can, then looks down at me and Hale sprawled on the bed.

I want to ask him to join us. I want to curl up between their two warm bodies and fall asleep.

But I'm afraid if I say that, I'll break the moment. So I just lift my hand toward him, a silent offer.

He steps a little closer and takes it, threading his fingers through mine. He doesn't crawl onto the bed beside us, but he bends down and lifts my hand to his lips, kissing each of my fingertips.

Just like Hale did earlier.

It was the first thing Hale did before building up to so much more.

And I can't help but hope it's a first step.

GRACE

HALE AND CIRO were both in the room when I fell asleep, but neither man is still there when I wake up.

As I blink my eyes open, my brows pull together.

Carefully arrayed on the nightstand are a variety of cough drops, throat soothing teas, painkillers, and a cream to treat bruises. My chest tightens a little, and I swallow, noticing the slight ache in my neck as I do.

I doubt any of these men keep tea in the house, which means that sometime between last night and this morning, Ciro went out and got all of this stuff before leaving it here for me. If I were trying to convince myself to hate these men, I might argue that his sweet gesture doesn't count—he's only trying to fix what he broke.

But he *didn't* break me.

I'm not that fucking breakable.

I'm not sure he'll ever see it that way though, or ever stop blaming himself for the demons that haunt him.

How can one of the sweetest men I've ever known also be one of the most terrifyingly violent? It's hard to reconcile the two halves of who Ciro is, and I worry that he doesn't even see the good side of himself anymore. The self-loathing on his face last night broke my heart. The way he wouldn't even touch me...

But he *did* touch me. After Hale made me come, after the three of us shared that moment, he let himself reach out for me, just once. I hope like hell that means he hasn't given up on himself entirely.

My body is sore in other places as I get out of bed and pad to the bathroom to shower. My skin is a patchwork of scrapes and bruises and healing wounds, and as I gaze at myself in the bathroom mirror, I realize I look like I've been through a war.

Except the war isn't over. It's still raging.

And I need to be a better soldier.

I need to protect my heart.

Every time I think I know where I stand with these men, something happens that knocks me completely off balance again. No matter how hard I try to keep my heart closed off, each of them seems to have found the cracks in my armor.

I SPEND most of the day in my room, slipping downstairs only to grab food and make tea. I eat dinner with the men, and although Hale's penetrating gaze practically burns a hole in my skin, I avoid meeting his eyes. Ciro, in turn, avoids looking at me, and Zaid and Lucas watch all three of us with curious gazes.

I do my best to keep my distance from all four of them for the next few days, although I find that I miss them in a strange way. I'm tempted to go looking for the twins or find Hale in his office, but I hold myself back.

Because now I *really* don't know where I stand. With any of them.

I'm not sure if Zaid and Lucas know what happened between me, Ciro, and Hale. Would Hale or Ciro tell them? Ciro, certainly not, but that's just because he's not the type to talk more than he has to. But Hale might've told them. Or they might've guessed.

I'm tempted to seek out Ciro too, but out of all the men, he's the one I feel least able to approach. There's a connection between us that I can't deny, but despite that small moment of contact between us while I lay on the bed beside Hale, I can feel how desperately Ciro wants to keep me at arm's length.

I was being honest when I told him I'm not afraid of him, but I don't know if that matters to him. The bruises on my neck take a few days to fade into nothing more than small greenish shadows, and I can practically feel the self-hatred and regret pouring from him every time he glances at them.

But he would never intentionally hurt me. I know that. He's a good person, underneath his scars and trauma. He's protective and caring and loyal to the people he loves.

Not like Brian.

The man I once thought I'd marry tried to kill me in cold blood. *He's* the one I should've been afraid of, but I was too blind to see any of the warning signs in him—and to be fair, he was a fucking good actor.

The nightmare I had the night I slept with Ciro has come back over and over again, haunting me, making me not want to sleep. I know Brian is dead, that he can't hurt me anymore. But that's not what scares me about the dream.

What scares me is that I don't know what the fuck Brian was doing, or who he was working for.

If he was working for someone, whoever it was, they still want me dead.

Thoughts and questions tumble around in my head like clothes in a dryer, and after several days of self-imposed isolation, I can't take it anymore. If I keep sitting around in my room thinking any longer, I'll go crazy.

It's a few hours past dinner, and I don't know where the guys are. Usually, I head straight back upstairs after we eat, so I don't know how they spend their evenings. They could be out taking care of mafia business, for all I know—although I somehow doubt they'd leave me entirely alone in the house, no matter what they tell me about not seeing me as a prisoner anymore.

Boredom gives me boldness. I've avoided snooping around the house until now, but if I'm truly going to be here for months or even years, I can't spend the whole time in my fucking bedroom. So I head downstairs, turning left instead of right when I reach the bottom and heading deeper into the house.

As I make my way down a wide hallway, my footsteps slow at the sound of low voices. Up ahead, a large open door leads to a warmly lit room, and the voices are coming from inside it. Biting my lip, I shrink back against the wall, debating.

The men have never explicitly told me *no* in regards to going anywhere in the house, but I'm not sure creeping around eavesdropping on conversations would be considered acceptable behavior for a

prisoner.

Or... whatever I am.

Although we have dinner together most nights and I see them around the house fairly often, I'm aware that the men don't discuss mafia business in front of me. I've been paying close attention, as desperate as they are to find out who the mole in the Novak Syndicate is. It concerns me too, considering whoever it is wanted me dead.

So instead of turning around and heading back up to my room, I tiptoe toward the open door silently, staying close to the wall to remain out of sight.

"My father is going to be at our throats until we figure out who this mole is." Hale's deep voice carries down the hallway, slightly muffled.

"I still can't believe we have a fucking mole," one of the twins says. From this distance, I can't tell who. "That one of our own betrayed us."

"Whoever it is, they signed their own fucking death warrant," Hale growls. "I'll kill the motherfucker myself once we find them."

The controlled fury in his voice makes goose bumps prickle over my skin. He means it.

"Damian's sent me and Lucas on a few undercover ops in the lower ranks," Zaid says, "but we haven't found anyone. They know who to fear and who to stay loyal to."

"Makes things worse if it's someone higher up," Lucas interjects. "Someone in a high power role with access to privileged information."

Hale mutters something under his breath that I can't make out, but continues, "Have you made any headway with the organization in Boston?"

"If you could call it that." I can hear the grimace in Zaid's voice. "We got a meeting set up with one of the captains, which is more than we've been able to do in months."

"He knows the deal would be beneficial to both of us," Hale mutters. "I'm not sure why he's hesitating."

"Not sure. Could be they're afraid of spreading themselves too thin," Lucas says. "Their forces are smaller than ours, and—"

He cuts off mid-sentence, and I freeze. I can almost imagine Hale holding up a hand, silencing him. My heart beats so loudly that I'm sure they can hear it from inside the room.

"Grace," Hale calls, almost lazily.

Fuck.

How the hell does he do that? Even that night in his office, when he was drunk on half a bottle of whiskey, he seemed to have a sixth sense for my presence.

"Come in here," he adds when I don't respond. There's a hint of amusement in his voice, underlying the commanding tone.

Knowing I can't disobey a direct order, I step into the room, my pulse racing. I could just pretend that I got lost in the big house and haven't been in the hallway long, but I have a feeling Hale knows exactly what I was doing outside the door.

Snooping.

The room is occupied by three out of the four men. Ciro is absent, and I feel bad that I'm almost thankful he isn't here. I'm not sure if I'm ready to face that awful self-loathing in his eyes again. It's hard to be around him, knowing that he won't let me shoulder some of the burden for him, that he doesn't trust himself around me.

A large leather couch and several large chairs dominate the space. I get the feeling this is the heart of the house, and I've just stepped into a den of hungry wolves, waiting to eat me alive. Lounging with

suit jackets off and ties untied, they're the picture of elegant leisure. Each of them is dangerously attractive, watching me through hooded eyes.

"Come here," Hale repeats when I pause at the threshold, his gaze burning into mine. When I hesitate, a smile slides across his face. "Don't be shy."

He watches me like a predator watching its prey, lazy and alert. Like he holds a chain that's tied to me, I cross the distance between us, my bare feet padding across the cool floor. Flicking that chain closer, he doesn't let me stop until our knees touch and I'm staring down into his eyes.

"Eavesdropping will get you into a shitload of trouble, Grace." He cocks his head to one side, his blue eyes glinting in the warm light. His dark hair is tousled, like he's been running his hands through it, and it makes him look sexy as fuck. "Should I punish you?"

A shock of awareness travels through my body, a jolt so strong it makes my clit throb.

Just from four little words.

"No."

My voice is breathy, and as he watches me bite my lip, his answering smirk tells me that he knows exactly what he just did to me.

I open my mouth to say something else, but before I can, Hale sets his glass on the small table beside his chair with a *clink*. His hands find my hips and roughly tug me down to his lap without warning, positioning me sideways on his legs and pulling me against his body.

I let out a little yelp, taken off guard by both the sudden movement and the possessiveness of the gesture.

It's a touch that says, *mine*.

My clit throbs again, arousal dampening my panties. Everything that passed between us a few nights ago is fresh in my mind as Hale's large hands settle on my waist, his fingertips brushing my ribs before one hand slides down over my ass.

I can't avoid making eye contact with Zaid and Lucas from where I sit. They're on the couch across from us, and as Hale palms my ass, Zaid's gaze tracks the movement. My heart breaks into a gallop. I'm acutely aware of every place that my body touches Hale's, and I'm torn between conflicting impulses to run away and to arch into his touch, grinding my body against his.

A flicker of movement near the door catches my eye, and I realize I was wrong earlier. *Ciro* is here. He's leaning against the wall near the doorway, almost completely still, which is why I didn't notice him when I first walked in.

He stays where he is, although his gaze locks on me, and the intensity of his gray eyes makes me burn.

And it's not just him. Three sets of eyes watch me as Hale drags his nose through my hair, inhaling me. It's almost too much to have every single one of these men focused on me, and I shiver a little as Hale presses a kiss to my temple. The other three don't look jealous, exactly. Or at least, they don't look angry. But they look like they want what Hale has.

Like they want me on their laps too.

I fight the sudden urge to try to make that happen—to somehow crawl into Zaid's lap, and Lucas's too. To pull *Ciro* over to the couch and curl up in his arms. To touch all of them at once.

To be with all of them at once.

The heat simmering in my belly from Hale's touch pulses, burning even hotter, and I try to hide my reaction to that thought.

Clearing my throat, I twist a little to meet Hale's gaze. "I didn't mean to overhear anything. I just wanted to get out of my room for a little while. I can leave if you guys are going to talk business—"

He tightens his grip on me, and I can feel the hot press of his cock against my thigh. He's not fully hard, but the feel of it is enough to make my breath catch.

"You don't have to sneak around, Grace," he murmurs. "You can go wherever you like in the house. We've got nothing to hide from you."

I snort softly, because they've got plenty to hide from me. I already know more about Novak business than I should—that's part of why Damian couldn't just let me go. They're not going to discuss their business in front of me, which is why I was eavesdropping.

But Hale surprises the fuck out of me when he shifts his gaze back to Lucas. His arms are still wrapped tightly around me, and his breath stirs a few loose tendrils of blonde hair as he speaks. "What were you saying? It's a small operation?"

"Yeah," Lucas says slowly, not taking his gaze off me. Then he shakes his head a little, as if trying to summon an earlier thought. "Yeah, they're small. But despite their size, if we get them on our side, it's a solid trade deal. They have what we need and we have what they want. It could be a good alliance for both of our syndicates."

"They also have intel on the Rook syndicate," Zaid adds, leaning back on the couch a little. "Damian has been up my ass about them. They're some new upstart organization, but no one seems to know a lot about them. They're hungry for the power and pushing hard to get a toehold here."

My eyebrows practically shoot up to my hairline.

What... what are they talking about?

I know what they're talking about, I just can't believe they're talking about it in front of me. To my shock, they continue on with their conversation as if I'm one of them, not changing the topic or getting quiet around me like they usually do. And as much as I want to believe that this means they trust me, I know the truth. And the truth scares the shit out of me.

This isn't about trust. Or at least, it isn't only about trust.

It's because they have no reason to hide things from me.

Because I'm never getting out.

I fight the urge to squirm out of Hale's lap, and as if sensing my tension, his hands press into me a little tighter, his chest brushing against my back as he leans over to pick up his glass again. He offers me a sip, but I mutter a hasty, *no, thank you*. There's no way I'm getting drunk around these four men, especially when they're already a few drinks in, relaxed and handsy. It's hard enough to keep my head on straight as it is.

The conversation continues, and I try to focus on their words and not the feel of Hale's hands on my body.

"They'll figure it out soon enough," Hale mutters. The vibrations of his deep voice rumble through my own chest. His fingers begin tracing a pattern on my thigh, and my skin awakens with anticipation. I try not to lean into him anymore than I've already unconsciously done. "This is Novak soil, not Rook soil. The Novaks don't take well to having their things taken away from them. We defend what belongs to us."

Hale's nose brushes against my neck, and I take a deep breath, trying to push away from the warmth of his body, but his hold on my hips is firm, keeping me in place.

And something about his words make me think he's not just talking about whoever this *Rook* syndicate is.

He's talking about something else.

He's talking about me.

Did they feel that way when Brian tried to take me away?

I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel, learning that they see me as theirs. But I'm absolutely certain it *shouldn't* feel like an achy knot inside my chest, spreading down to the lowest part of me, heating my blood.

What the fuck am I doing?

I almost want to laugh like a maniac, or maybe scream like one. In less than a month, my life was completely turned around, my hopes and plans changed. I went from planning to marry a cop to living in a fucking mansion with four mafia men.

Four dangerously alluring men, each whom I've either kissed or had sex with.

Four men I feel drawn to, heart, body, and soul.

LUCAS

IT'S crazy how fast people can adapt to new circumstances. Not a bad thing, just pretty mind-blowing, when you think about it.

A few weeks ago, it was just me, Zaid, Hale, and Ciro living in this house. Now, I can't fucking imagine the place without Grace in it.

She's changed everything.

She's filled a hole in our lives that we didn't even know was there.

I know she wasn't happy about this arrangement. After everything she's been through, I wish I could've given her freedom—true freedom. But it's not possible. Damian won't just let her walk away from all this, and not even Hale can make him.

Besides, if there's a mole in the syndicate, if there's someone out there who wants Grace dead, she's better off with us.

We'll keep her safe. We won't let any motherfucker hurt her.

And even though she was unhappy with the arrangement at first, I think she's settling in at our house, getting more comfortable and starting to feel less like a prisoner. After we caught her eavesdropping a few nights ago, she's come downstairs after dinner a few more times. Hale openly talks Novak business in front of her, and the rest of us follow his lead and do the same.

She listens too. She pays attention, and I swear I can practically see the thoughts behind her eyes as she processes every bit of information she picks up. It's a dangerous game Hale's playing, allowing her to see that deeply into our organization, but I know why he's doing it.

Just like the rest of us, he wants to show her that she's not a prisoner. Not in any of the ways that count.

The lines are still blurry as fuck though. I hate it. She has free rein to go anywhere she likes in the house, but she still sometimes tiptoes around like she's waiting for a trap to spring on her. And who can blame her for feeling that way? No matter what feelings exist between us, our past always seems to bleed into the present, a constant reminder that she shouldn't trust any of us.

It doesn't help that trust is in short supply in general these days. I find myself looking around at my fellow syndicate members anytime I'm at Onyx, wondering which one of them might've betrayed us.

Hale is stressed as hell about the mole. We all are.

But since no one except the four of us and Damian knows we've got a rat in our midst, we have to pretend nothing's up. We don't want to potentially scare the fucker and lose him, and as much as it's gonna suck to find out exactly who's been playing us behind our backs for so long, it's our top priority. The only way we're gonna find out who it is will be by catching them in the act of betrayal,

and that's not gonna happen unless our mole feels confident he's succeeding. The way we do that is by continuing on as if nothing has happened.

But we can't keep this up forever. Every day that goes by without us nailing that asshole to the wall is another day he has to plot against us.

Who knows what else he's got planned?

On Saturday, Zaid and I leave the house and head outside the city for a pickup from one of our suppliers. It's a routine errand, and I'm relieved as fuck that at least some things are going smoothly.

We head back to Onyx, and as I pull into the alley behind the club, Zaid alerts security of our arrival. He hangs up his phone as I turn left, heading down the ramp into the parking garage below the building. We'll swap out for our own car after we meet with Damian, leaving the van here for some of the soldiers to unpack and inventory. *If* there is anything missing, which there shouldn't be, our dealer will pay for it.

After ducking out of the van, we take a small flight of stairs that opens to the back of the club, and as we step inside, three older men emerge from Damian's office.

Frank Leblanc, Leland Bennett, and Stanley Wheeler are all older members of our syndicate with a personal hatred for Grace's father. They were all close friends with Landon Novak, and they've nursed a grudge against Samuel Weston for his betrayal ever since he got Landon sent to jail and then fled Chicago.

"Zaid. Lucas. How is it living with the offspring of a Judas?" Stanley smirks, sauntering over to us.

Frank grimaces. "Fucking bitch. She may be pretty, but even I wouldn't want the daughter of a rat wrapping her sweet little mouth around my—"

My whole body tenses, red filling my vision in a flash. I lunge without thinking, but my brother's reflexes are quicker. He stops me from doing anything stupid with a hand to my chest, pushing me back as he catches my gaze. He shakes his head, his green eyes flashing. He's just as pissed as I am, but luckily, he's not as stupid. He's got the sense to know that picking a fight with Damian's captains is a good way to end up dead.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Stanley's dark hair gleams as he cocks his head, his eyes narrowing.

"You don't know what the *fuck* you're talking about," I say through gritted teeth.

"Nah." His voice lowers. "I'm not the one who can't see straight, son. You don't know who you're dealing with."

Leland steps up beside him. He's got reddish-brown hair with gray at the temples, and his blunt features twist into a scowl. "Stanley's right. Westons are fucking rats. She'll turn out just like her father, I guarantee it. So enjoy that pussy while you can, before it grows teeth and bites your dick off."

Zaid's fingers flex against my chest, again commanding me to keep my mouth shut and let them walk away. Getting into a fight with Stanley or any of these guys is dumb as hell, but that doesn't mean I have to like the angry smirks on their faces as they turn and walk away. That doesn't mean I wouldn't like to punch Stanley in his smug face until blood coats his teeth.

My whole body is tense, but Zaid reminds me with a cock of his head that we've still got work to do—meeting with Damian. The rest is a routine that puts me back into a better headspace, familiar stuff like debriefing with our leader, checking up on syndicate business, and letting him know how our assignments have gone.

It passes by in a blur, and soon we're back in the car, tension still hanging on my shoulders. Forcing myself to take a deep breath and let go of it, I stare out the window as Zaid starts the car and

pulls out of the parking garage.

We're barely out of the alleyway before he slams a hand against the steering wheel. "Goddammit! That fucking cocksucker."

I almost grin, although there's nothing funny about this. He's better at keeping his emotions under control than I am, but I should've known he'd explode as soon as we left the club.

"I can't take this anymore." He runs a hand through his hair. "I can't fucking take it."

I grimace. "Yeah. I know. We're all strung out right now, but we need to just stay chill and—"

"No. Fuck that." He curses under his breath. "I don't want to chill out. I'm pissed as fuck. I'm pissed at those old fuckers for blaming Grace for shit her dad did. Shit she didn't even know about! And I'm pissed that Grace doesn't trust us, that *these* are the circumstances that brought us back together. Jesus, I thought about her for years after she disappeared, hoping I'd see her again one day. Hoping she'd come back."

"Yeah."

I clench my jaw. Zaid and I are close as hell, and I know exactly what he's talking about. I find my own emotions mirroring his. All the anger I stuffed down to keep from hauling off and decking Stanley is rising back up.

"Fuck, man." Zaid scrubs a hand through his hair again. "I spent so long wondering if this moment would ever happen. Grace coming home. And now that it has, Damian's on her back, there's a mole in our syndicate, and she hates us."

"She doesn't hate us," I mutter. I'm not sure if I'm saying it because I actually think it's true, or because I just can't stand to think of Grace despising us.

I mean, hell, the way she looks at me sometimes... the way she looks at all of us? It seems a lot closer to love than hate. But the fucked up part is, every time she gets that soft look in her eyes, it always vanishes eventually, hidden behind the walls she keeps putting up. I can't blame her. The way our lives collided was violent and fucked up—not the kind of thing you're supposed to build something real and lasting on.

But I want to. Even though it seems impossible. I want her to look at me with love and desire in her hazel eyes, and I don't want the lingering remnants of distrust to infect that anymore.

I just don't know how the hell to get there. How to reach that point.

"I know Hale has something for her, and I'm not exactly sure what that is, but honestly, I'm jealous," Zaid continues. His hands flex on the steering wheel, and he keeps his gaze on the road. "I'm jealous because *I* want to be the one to protect her. I want to be the one she goes to."

My fingers tap out a sharp rhythm on my thigh as I consider what he just said. Even though I know that shit's gone down between Grace and each one of us, even *Ciro*, it doesn't make me want her any less.

But who gets to have her? Ultimately, which one of us will she choose? Or will she never be able to let go of her distrust enough to truly care for any of us?

I've thought about the same thing my brother has... Hale has some unspoken claim on her that goes deeper than lust, something that's going to get him into a shitload of trouble.

He's falling in love with her.

I'm fucking sure of it.

"I'm not willing to back off," I say slowly, admitting to my brother something that's been brewing in my head for a while now. "Just because he feels whatever he feels for her. Grace is her own person who can make her own choices. And if it's Hale, so be it. If it's not Hale, then it's still our job to step in and make sure she doesn't feel like a fucking prisoner."

Because that isn't how it is.

Grace is a guest in our house, whether she realizes it or not. Sure, maybe in Damian's book she's still a prisoner, but not to me. It's an honor to have her with us, and believe me, if she were a prisoner, she'd be treated a whole fuck of a lot differently. Our prisoners usually don't get a guest suite with a king-sized bed and free access to anywhere they want to go in the house.

"Hale may be in command when it comes to anything syndicate related, but Grace isn't the syndicate." It sounds like direct defiance, but it's the truth, and even Hale knows it. "If he gets pissed about the fact that we're not willing to back down, then fuck him. He doesn't get to decide how we feel about Grace, or how she feels about any of us."

Zaid doesn't say anything in response, and we fall into a brooding silence on the rest of the drive home, each contemplating our own shit.

When we get home and pull into the garage, I glance at Zaid as he pulls the key from the ignition. "Go on in. I'll head inside in a little bit. I just need to... get my head on straight."

He grunts in acknowledgement of my words, punching my shoulder lightly before sliding out and slamming his door shut behind him. I open my own door but don't get out of the car right away. Instead, I just stare at the dash, trying to untangle the knot of emotions in my chest.

It's up to Grace to decide how she feels about us.

The words I said to my brother flash through my head again, and I nod absently. It *is* up to Grace. Ciro, Hale, Zaid, and I can spend hours fighting over her if we want, but the truth is, none of that will mean shit if she hasn't chosen any of us.

Because we can't force her to care about us.

All we can do is try to earn her trust. To show her, in every way we possibly can, that things can be different between us. That the violence and chaos that brought us together don't have to define our relationship going forward.

With a flare of determination, I get out of the car, slamming the door behind me. Why wait? Why should I waste another hour, another minute, another day, waiting for her to come around on her own? I may not be able to push along the process of weeding out the traitor any quicker, but I'm going to do my best to make sure Grace doesn't feel like a fucking prisoner any longer.

I'm still not sure if it's that simple, but why shouldn't I try?

My mind is still churning with thoughts as I head to the kitchen. Zaid and I do most of the cooking around here, since we actually enjoy it and Hale and Ciro don't. Lately, our meals have been pretty simple since we've got so much other shit on our plate, but I decide that tonight, I'll make something special. Something Grace loves.

As I'm setting out what I need for dinner, I hear footsteps behind me.

Soft. Almost tentative.

The sweet scent of jasmine tickles my nostrils, and I know without turning around that it's Grace.

I don't say anything as I glance over my shoulder. Her expression shutters as our gazes meet, her footsteps stalling as she braces herself against the counter. When she glances back at the door as if she's about to leave, I take three steps toward her.

No. Not tonight.

For one evening, I want to pretend like she's ours, like she *believes* that she's ours.

Because she does belong here, whether she's come to terms with it or not.

GRACE

“WAIT.”

Before I can slip out of the room, Lucas strides over to me and grasps my arm, tugging me back toward him. With a gentle smirk playing at his lips, he pulls me deeper into the kitchen, pressing me flush up against his body in the process. My skin burns with the fleeting contact, heat settling deep in my body somewhere I pretend to ignore.

“Not tonight, Grace,” he says in a low voice. “Don’t run, okay? Stay with me.”

Zaid enters the kitchen through the side entrance before I can answer, freshly showered and in more casual clothes than I usually see them in. When I meet his gaze, something instantly sparks to life in them. He glances between his brother and me, and something tells me there’s not a hint of jealousy there.

Zaid and Lucas have always been close, the type of close that’s almost eerie sometimes. I wouldn’t be surprised if they shared thoughts without realizing it, felt pain when the other one felt pain, so something tells me he’s thinking the same thing that’s filtering through my thoughts now. The same thing that I’m sure is on Lucas’s mind...

That night.

The night Brian attacked me, after I showered and rinsed away the blood and grime from my ordeal. I couldn’t sleep, so I went downstairs and found them in the kitchen. Alone.

Something sparked between us, something that’d been building for days. It almost felt inevitable when I found myself sandwiched between them, Lucas’s lips blazing a hot path down my neck while Zaid gripped my hips, kissing me hungrily.

And what would’ve happened if we hadn’t stopped?

If I hadn’t been distracted by suddenly remembering the name Brian had mentioned on the phone—*damn Brian, even dead he still fucks things up*—what would have happened between the three of us?

I swallow as my imagination explodes with answers to that question. Lucas is still holding me close to his large, broad-shouldered frame, and I can feel his thumb tracing idly over the bare skin of my arm.

Squeezing my legs together, I clear my throat, trying to banish the thick tension that’s flooded the kitchen. I can’t pull myself out of it like I usually can. My pulse thunders in my ears, blood rushing to my head... and to my clit.

But before I can do something monumentally stupid, like try to pick up exactly where we left off that night, Lucas releases his hold on me, stepping back. Heat still lingers in his eyes, but he doesn’t

make a move to touch me again. Almost like he knows how much it destroys my resolve when he does, and he wants to make sure I'm clearheaded when I respond.

"Stay with us," he says again, and I can hear the gentle plea in his voice. "Help us make dinner."

"You really don't want me to help you," I say, trying to come up with an excuse. "I'm terrible at cooking. Never learned how to."

"Then at least just watch." He grins. "It'll be fun. I promise."

Jesus. I get the feeling he's deliberately trying to tone down the sexual tension that bubbles between the three of us—as if he wants to prove that what exists between us is more than that, *deeper* than that. But if he's trying to get my mind out of the gutter, uttering the phrase "at least just watch" is the wrong way to go about it.

His words immediately conjure images of *Ciro* watching from across the room while *Hale* fucked me on the bed. Of *Zaid* fisting his cock desperately, cum spilling over his hand as *Hale* made me climax with his fingers.

The words "just watch" are fraught with meaning, full of memories that make my body ache so intensely it almost scares me.

I swallow and let out a breath, trying to cool my heated blood.

Lucas's eyes darken a little, almost like he's seen inside my head and knows just how dirty my thoughts have gotten. Still, he seems determined to prove the point he set out to make. He doesn't reach for me again. Instead, he takes a small step backward, leaving me with a free exit.

But I don't take it.

I stand frozen for a long moment, glancing from him to his brother, trying to understand what this means.

It's an undeniable fact that I'm drawn to all four of the men who kidnapped me. But what if there could truly be more for us than that? More than just fierce attraction and a desperate craving?

What if there could be... this?

The three of us making dinner together. Just *being* together. Easy and peaceful. Comfortable.

As soon as I have the thought, my heart skips a beat. I didn't realize until this exact moment how much I've wanted this. How badly I've been aching to just feel *normal* for a little while.

"Yeah." I nod, biting my lip. "Okay, I'll stay. I'm not gonna just watch though. I want to help."

Lucas's smile is so wide it looks like it might split his face in half. *Zaid* grins too, and the entire atmosphere of the kitchen lightens. Maybe they needed this just as much as I did.

"Great." *Lucas's* green eyes glint with pleasure as he jerks his head, inviting me to come stand next to him near the counter. "I'll give you an easy job. Promise."

He's already set everything out on the counter—an array of vegetables, meat, spices, baking goods, bowls, spoons—and he sets me up with a cutting board and gives me directions on how to cut the vegetables.

As I get started, *Lucas* begins to work on a sauce, mixing and measuring with ease. *Zaid* grabs a few more ingredients from the pantry and takes over another section of the large kitchen counter. We continue in silence for a little while, and I find myself smiling as I watch the two of them work together.

"Do you guys ever just heat up a microwave dinner?" I ask, my eyebrows pulling together as I chop carefully. "Or throw a frozen pizza in the oven?"

"That's no fun." *Zaid* winks at me. He's working on some kind of dough, his hands dusted with flour as he kneads it. He's rolled his sleeves up in a way that shows off the muscles of his forearms, and I watch them ripple as he works, trying not to notice how fucking sexy it is.

“You guys put me to shame,” I say, dragging my gaze back up to his face. “I’ve never been great in the kitchen, and Brian wasn’t much of a cook either.”

“Brian wasn’t much of a man,” Lucas says shortly. I get the feeling the twins have been trying to keep the atmosphere in the kitchen light and relaxed, but there’s a hard edge to his voice that he can’t hide.

I don’t mind it though. If anything, hearing the anger in his voice makes warmth spread through my chest.

Brian wasn’t much of a man. He was a lying, slimy worm who didn’t deserve even a second of the time I spent with him. And knowing that Lucas and Zaid see it that way too unwinds the knot that tries to form in my chest every time I think of Brian.

He’s gone. I don’t have to let his betrayal wreck me.

“Well, I’m impressed,” I say, distracting myself from my own thoughts.

“Hey, we aim to please.” Zaid waggles his eyebrows at me, and I blush a little.

Lucas chuckles, but his expression grows serious as he turns away from the stove and catches my gaze. “We want you to be happy here, Grace. I don’t know quite how to make it happen, but we’re trying.”

The sincerity of his words knocks me back a little. It’s the most open and honest I’ve ever heard him be, all joking and charm pushed aside until only the truth remains.

They want me here. And they want me to be happy.

My stomach flips, and for the first time, I wonder why I’m fighting so hard against the pull I feel toward these men. I wonder what would happen if I *stopped* fighting. If I just let go and trusted that they would catch me.

“Can I ask you a question?” I clear my throat slightly, wondering if I should proceed. I know a little bit of their history, but not everything.

“We might not have an answer,” Zaid says, “but you’re more than welcome to ask.”

“Do you talk to your parents anymore?”

I know it’s a pushy question and I shouldn’t ask it, but last I heard, Zaid and Lucas’s parents weren’t in their life anymore. Not because they were dead, but uninterested.

There’s a beat of silence as Lucas looks at his brother, a rapid, silent conversation happening between the two of them.

Thinking about cooking reminds me of families, for some reason. My mother cooked all the time, although she never taught me more than the very basics. She was a perfect mafia wife in that respect, running the household while dad dealt with business for the syndicate. For a while after her death, after we fled from Chicago, my father tried to replicate things she used to cook—but we both knew it would never be the same, and he eventually stopped trying.

“We tried for a little while,” Lucas says simply. “They just never reciprocated.”

“Not long after they handed us over to Damian to pay their *debts*”—Zaid says the last word sarcastically—“they dropped out of our lives.”

“I’m sorry.”

Anger burns inside me at their parents. I never even met them, but I know their father essentially traded Lucas and Zaid into Damian’s service to clear a debt he owed when they were twelve. They did low-level tasks for the syndicate for a few years, but by the time the term of their service was up, they’d become friends with Hale and Ciro. They stayed, working their way up the ranks to where they are now.

“Don’t be sorry.” Lucas shrugs. “We have a new family now. *This* is our family. Family isn’t

decided by blood. It's decided by the people who take care of you and who you care for. I don't miss the old man, or our mom. She put up a sort of half-assed fight when he made the bargain with Damian, but she never really cared."

"It was shitty growing up knowing we weren't wanted by the two people who should've mattered," Zaid says, his voice low. The light atmosphere in the kitchen has slipped away again, but unlike the tension that's been hovering over us for the past week, this feels... different. It feels *intimate*. "But the only reason we have what we have now is because of them. And I wouldn't trade this life for the world. They're the ones who lost out in all of this, not us."

I smile at him, even as something twists in my chest.

I wish it could be like that for me too.

There's a gaping hole in my heart that's been there for years, and over the past few weeks, it's been feeling more and more empty. I crave the same sense of family that Zaid and Lucas found here with Hale and Ciro.

But is that even possible?

Could there truly be a place for me in this world? A place where I'm not a captive, but something more?

CIRO

THE BASEMENT IS cool and quiet.

Calm.

Everything is arranged the way it always is, but I still check over the rows of guns, weapons, and various torture mechanisms to make sure it's all in place. Every item accessible for the next time I need it. I usually come down here once a week to clean and make sure everything's organized, but this is the third night in a row I've slipped downstairs into what Zaid once jokingly called my lair.

The routine of maintaining my equipment is muscle memory now, and I'm only half conscious as I look over the items, lost in my thoughts.

Grace.

I haven't been able to let her go, haven't been able to shut her out or forget what happened between us.

After years of closing myself off and pushing things aside, this should be simple, but it's not. It's haunting me. It's like I'm torturing *myself* down here, not some enemy soldier. I keep forcing myself to relive the entirety of that night over and over again—not just the good part, but the fucking awful part. I can never forget the consequences of my actions. The consequences of letting go.

I look down at my hands, scarred and rough, imagining them wrapped around her throat, choking the life out of her. I could have killed her. I almost *killed* her. If Hale hadn't come in when he did, if he hadn't heard Grace's strangled cry by pure fucking luck...

Hale knows to shoot me if it happens again.

Not that it ever will happen again, because I'm never going to put myself and Grace in a situation where it *could* happen again. But to know there's a contingency plan lined up eases a little of the guilt in me, makes me feel better about being around her. I tried to avoid her for a few days, because every time I looked at the bruises on her neck, I thought about coming down here and eating a bullet.

But I don't want to let my demons win like that.

I won't abandon Hale or the others.

I'll have to face Grace eventually. I know I can't avoid her for the rest of her stay here.

I've already forgotten the dream, the night terror. I forgot it the moment Hale dragged me back to consciousness. I'll never know what scared me so fucking much that I did what I did, but I do know the way it felt to realize what I had done. To have no memory of *why*, to feel like there was a monster living inside me, possessing me to do that. I know what it feels like to not feel like your body is your own, and I hate it.

I hate it so fucking much.

Grabbing one of the guns on the table, I pick it up and fire three shots into the bare cement wall.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

They all hit in the exact same spot, my aim perfectly accurate. *That's* what I'm good at. I'm good at breaking shit. At wrecking shit.

I can kill.

I can torture brutally and efficiently.

But I was kidding myself if I thought I could touch something beautiful without breaking it.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I pick up the next gun, a smaller one, and repeat the action, tilting my head to the side slightly as I focus on the shot.

Crack.

Her face haunts me.

Crack.

The way her eyes shone with tears when she said she trusted me, as if she meant it.

Crack.

I know she meant it. The way she said it, there was nothing but truth in her eyes, nothing but blind trust and forgiveness.

Crack.

I want it. Fuck, I want it so much. I want to be *worthy* of her trust, deserving of her belief in me. She's offered it to me freely, but I'll never take it until I know for certain that she's giving it to someone who deserves it.

Crack.

And I don't deserve it, not now. Maybe not ever.

I throw the gun back on the table, scattering tools, guns, knives, and weapons with a *crash*, messing up the perfect order and methodical arrangements, not giving a fuck. The thoughts are overwhelming, crawling through my head like living things.

I want you, Grace. I want to fuck you. I want to... to have you.

It almost felt like I *could* have her for a second, as I watched Hale fuck her like I wanted to. I wanted Hale's hands on her body to be my own. I wanted her to make those sweet little noises for me, not him.

My cock twitches just thinking about it, frustration burning through me. My whole body has been more... alive and alert since it happened, like nerve-endings I thought were dead have suddenly switched back on. My need for her feels like a palpable thing now, not just an *idea* of desire.

It's been years since I've jerked off, not since before I was captured—even my own touch was unwelcome, triggering—but now just thinking about her makes me want to wrap my hands around my dick and try to find that same momentary satisfaction I experienced watching her and Hale.

My cock pulses again, and I rub the heel of my hand over it through my pants, half giving in to the need for relief and half trying to banish the growing erection. I give myself a second to bury my hungry thoughts of Grace before standing up and collecting myself. Dragging in a few deep breaths, I work on clearing my head and fixing the mess of weapons I made, returning everything back to where it belongs.

Everything in its place.

Just like me.

I do better when I keep myself under control. When I remember not to hope for things I don't have any right to want.

The door clicks open, the quiet sound snapping me out of my thoughts.

My head whips up, my fingers already wrapping around the gun in front of me, my entire body instantly alert. I relax when I see that it's Zaid, and he doesn't even flinch when he sees my hand on my weapon. He trusts me.

Why does everyone around me trust me so much? Don't they know they shouldn't?

"Dinner's ready," he says, then grins at me. "Grace helped make it."

With that pronouncement, he leaves, closing the door again behind him.

He knows I don't like to be disturbed while I'm down here. I like to keep this room firmly "other." A place for cleaning weapons, maintaining my tools, and methodically inflicting pain. The less often other people step inside this room, the easier it is to leave what happens down here buried in the basement where it belongs.

Focusing back on the table, I make quick work of inventorying everything, absently finishing before stepping outside and locking up the room behind me. Sliding the only key to that room into my pocket, I make my way up the long flight of stairs to the ground floor, then head toward the dining room.

I pause in the hallway at the sound of Grace's laughter—it's light and airy, a sound I haven't heard in years. The tension in my shoulders melts a little at the comforting sound. Fuck, I need to hear it again and again. I need to feel it against my skin, need to absorb it into my soul.

Zaid and Lucas interject with something teasing, earning another laugh, and something in my chest twists at the sound of their easy banter. It's times like these that I don't want to bring my darkness into the room, to tear down everyone's light with my demons. It's times like these when I want nothing more than to be fucking *normal* again.

All eyes look up as I enter the dining room, but the only person I look at is Grace, unable to keep my gaze away from her.

My heart gives the faintest stutter, my pulse leaping to my throat.

There are still bruises on her neck, although they're not as dark as they used to be. But even though the evidence of my weakness and violence still sits on her skin, Grace's gaze isn't filled with loathing or fear. It doesn't have a trace of pity or anger, just *softness*. A kind of softness that only she possesses, one that infuses every part of her.

Her voice, her skin, her scent.

"Here," she says gently, gesturing to the seat next to her. "Sit here."

I hesitate, my muscles going rigid.

It's too dangerous, I might hurt her.

But Zaid and Lucas both look at me with a glance that says, *you'll hurt her if you don't sit there.*

Muttering a thank you, I move to sit next to her, aware of the heat radiating off her skin. I think she smiles at me, but I can't quite see it because I won't let myself turn to look at her. Her arm brushes against mine when she grabs a plate from Hale, and my traitorous cock stiffens again.

"As it turns out." Lucas casts a teasing grin in her direction as he serves up the food. "Grace is not the best at cooking. But we managed just fine."

She gives a gasp of mock offense. "We already discussed this. I never learned how to cook because my mother never taught me to cook. She was breaking the traditional gender roles society wanted to push me into."

It's a stretch, knowing Camilla Weston, but Grace is only joking. From everything I know about her, Camilla was one of the most traditional mafia wives in the syndicate. She was quiet and calculating, maintaining her house and supporting her husband in anything he did. Samuel adored her, despite the fact that she never gave him a son.

Zaid chuckles, opening his mouth to say something, but a noise from the front of the house stops him.

It's not loud, but there's something about the sound that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It sounds almost like a cry, like a weak scream.

"What the hell was that?" Lucas mutters.

Before the words are even out of his mouth, Hale and I are on our feet. Zaid and Lucas are up a second later, reaching for their weapons.

Acting as a unit, we fall into trained positions, guarding each other's backs and sweeping the house, looking for the source. Security wasn't triggered, which means the intruder isn't hiding in the house, though they may think they're clever by waiting at one of the doors for a surprise attack.

Staying silent and alert, Zaid cocks his head to the front door as we move into the foyer, keeping our guns aimed at the heavy wood.

Splitting up, the four of us position ourselves on either side of the door before Hale unlocks it and flings it open. I step to one side, my weapon raised as I scan for threats, but there's no one standing in front of the door.

Then my gaze moves downward, and I realize exactly where the noise came from.

"Shit!" As Zaid moves to step out of the door, Lucas throws a hand out to stop his brother. "Look at that."

I mutter a string of curses under my breath as we all take in the slaughtered dog on our front step, mutilated and bleeding out. It's a fresh kill, and the sound we must have heard was its last cry for life.

But that's not the worst of it.

As Zaid nudges the dead animal with his foot, already hunting for clues, the tag on its collar glints in the fading late evening sunlight. The name on the tag sends a chill down my spine.

Grace.

GRACE

THE SOUND that cut Lucas off sent a jolt of fear straight through me. It was the sound of pain and fear laced with death.

It was almost scary how quickly the guys fell into warrior mode, snapping into their positions as if we weren't all just joking around seconds ago. There were weapons in their hands before I even had a second to register that something was wrong. They stalked out of the dining room like trained soldiers, leaving me alone with five steaming plates of food.

My heart thunders in my chest as adrenaline spikes in my veins. Alone, I don't know what to do. I feel a bit like I should grab a weapon myself and join them. Like I should have their backs.

Do something, Grace.

I hear them stalk through the house quietly, their feet turning in the direction of the front door and hesitating. As I rise from my chair, the door clicks open, and their murmured curses are lost in the shuffle of their feet.

I hesitate with my hand on the edge of the dining room table, straining my ears for any hint of what's going on. When there are no sounds of gunshots or a fight, I take a few steps into the foyer.

The men are standing just inside the front door. Their alert postures have relaxed, but a new kind of tension seems to hang over them. Hale's expression is dark, and Zaid and Lucas look like they could kill someone. Ciro's back is to me, but even without seeing his face, I can tell he's pissed.

I stride toward the door and slip between their large bodies, trying to see what's going on.

"What's going on? What do...?"

The words die on my lips as I get a glimpse of what lies on the front stoop. Lucas immediately tries to hold me back, the guys blocking the scene with their bodies, but it's too late.

"Oh, my God."

The image of the mauled dog will forever be seared into my mind, its head and body bashed and bloody. Sprawled out on the front step, it's a brutal, heartbreaking sight. I can almost imagine that it's still breathing, labored and painful, but I know it's dead. There's no doubt that the sound we heard came from this animal's last cry for help, freshly killed and mutilated.

My hand comes to my mouth, trying to force back the bile that's rising in my throat, but Lucas wraps his arms tightly around me and pushes us back into the foyer, the other men blocking the sight and quickly shutting the door behind them.

My whole body shakes and blood rushes to my ears, blocking out the words of the men surrounding me.

That was one of the most horrifying things I've ever seen, second only to that day at the church

when my wedding was ambushed.

And this is nothing compared to what it could have been.

I was raised in the mafia. My father shielded me from the more disturbing aspects of his work, but I know that mafia life can be brutal and cruel. You step on the wrong person's toes, and something worse than this could happen—that dog could have been replaced with a person, someone we know, a loved one.

And it was meant to send a message.

“Who the fuck decided it was a good idea to leave her alone?” Hale's voice interrupts my thoughts and I look up to see him give Lucas and Zaid a sharp look. “What if it had been an intruder? You left her alone, unprotected.”

“I'm fine,” I mutter hoarsely, but no one is listening.

“It could have been Grace and not that dog because of your stupid—”

“I'm fine, okay?” I raise my voice a little, shaking. “Hale, I'm fine.”

At the sound of his name, he finally looks at me, eyes flashing. There's nothing but protective rage in his dark blue eyes, fury toward whoever just dumped a dead animal on the doorstep. But they soften a little when he looks at me, and I watch him scan my body as if reassuring himself that despite the gruesome scene outside, I'm still here and in one piece.

When he realizes that I'm fine, he breaks away from the group with a curse, pacing up and down the length of the hallway.

“Are you okay?” Lucas asks softly, looking at me. Guilt twists his features.

“Yeah, I'm fine.” I hate that I'm as shaken as I am, but Jesus fuck. That image is burned into my retinas. “Really, I'm okay.”

Now that the initial shock has passed, I'm more worried about the stormy look on Hale's face as he tries to master his rage, pacing up and down the length of the foyer. He practically has smoke coming out of his ears, his body laced with vicious and barely contained fury.

He stops, taking his phone out of his pocket and tapping at the screen. He puts it to his ear, and there's a murmur on the other end as someone answers.

“There's been a development.” Hale swallows, fingers twitching in agitation at his side. He's pissed, and he looks like he wants nothing more than to tear down the whole city with his bare hands. “With Grace.”

“How does this have anything to do with me?” I whisper, shooting a glance at the other men. My heart thunders in my chest, fear slowly gripping me and spreading through my body at Hale's words.

Zaid, Lucas, and Ciro exchange a grimace, and I almost think they're going to refuse to tell me. That despite the fact that Hale said they had nothing to hide from me, the lies and secrets are going to start back up again. But before I can open my mouth and demand they tell me, Zaid speaks up.

“The dog...” He looks back at the door, cringing as if it pains him to speak the words he has to say. “That fucking dog. Its collar had your name on it. It wasn't a threat to us; it was a threat to you.”

My stomach drops out. “What?”

There are so many more questions I want to ask, but I can't force any of them out. The words die on my lips as nausea roils my stomach. My knees wobble, and Ciro reaches out to stop me from falling. His grip is reassuring, although he releases me as soon as he can tell I'm not going to keel over.

I miss his touch immediately. I need it like I need a fucking anchor, something to keep me steady in this storm.

How the fuck did I let myself get involved with this?

This is all so much bigger than I thought. It started with my kidnapping, but it's gone so far beyond that now that my mind struggles to keep up.

It's no longer about my dad and what he was or wasn't doing in his past, what he was involved with before he died. It's now about me, and what scares me more than anything is that I don't know what the fuck I've done to provoke it.

Hale hangs up the phone, still barely contained, but more calm. He looks at each of us, his gaze lingering on me.

“We're going to meet with my father. Now.”

HALE

I'VE NEVER BEEN SO FUCKING mad.

My entire body shakes with red hot rage aimed directly at the fucker who thought this was funny, who thought they could get away with this without signing the line and begging for their own death. They're asking for a bullet in their brain. *Worse*. The same fate that this dog got, they'll be getting.

By my own hands.

Get a grip, I tell myself, forcing a deep breath.

I can't let my father see me in this state. He can't know how much this is fucking with me. If he knew just how pissed I am right now, it would make him doubt my ability to lead—he's always told me that emotions have no place in a syndicate leader's decisions. He prides himself on staying calm and acting rationally, and normally, I can do the same thing.

But right now?

Jesus fucking Christ, I could spiral out of control and into a mad rage at this point. I'm almost there, but I know it's just recklessness.

No one threatens Grace while she's under my roof.

Fucking *no one*.

"Wrap up the dog," I say, forcing down my blind rage and slipping back into the leader mindset I need to be in. "Find a sheet, something, I don't care. We'll take it with us. One of my father's men can do an autopsy and check the body for forensic evidence. It's a long shot and unlikely that we'll find anything, but maybe we'll get fucking lucky. Zaid, you sweep around the house to see if anyone is still around. Lucas, check the security cameras. This isn't an amateur, so I doubt we'll get anything there either, but I'm not leaving any stone unturned."

Everyone nods, falling into their roles quickly. We don't have any time to waste.

"Grace, I'm going to walk you upstairs to get shoes and a coat. Everyone, we'll meet in the garage in five minutes."

Ciro opens the door and slips outside to deal with the dog as Zaid and Lucas splinter off in different directions. Grace moves quickly up the stairs, not saying anything to me as she steps into her room and heads toward her closet. I wait as patiently as I can as she slips into shoes and pulls a sweater over her head, then nods to let me know she's ready.

We head back down the hall, down the stairs, and into the main entrance. The door is open but the dog is already gone. Ciro's pouring a chemical on the front step that will quickly remove the vicious red stain that mars the stone.

Grace looks away from the scene, still quiet. Her normally pale skin is even more pallid than

usual, and it makes a fresh wave of rage surge through me. I want to reach out, to say something to her, but I don't trust myself right now. If I let my emotions out, I'm afraid I'll scare her even worse than she already is.

Zaid and Lucas meet us in the garage. Lucas catches my gaze and shakes his head. "Nothing on the security footage. They blacked out the cameras that cover the front of the house."

"Fuck." I expected that report, but I still hate it.

Ciro loads the dog, wrapped in a bloody sheet, into the trunk. He slipped its collar with the tag bearing Grace's name into a small plastic bag, and he hands it to me as everyone piles into the car.

The sun sets fully as we make the drive to Onyx, the streets of Chicago growing dark as they rush by. My mind spins the entire way over, and before I realize it, I'm pulling into the underground garage we use for security purposes.

"Wait to take the dog inside until I've left with Grace," I instruct my men, not wanting Grace to have to see it again.

It's bad enough that she saw it fucking *once*.

Goddammit. She was supposed to be safe with me. With us.

I grit my teeth as I guide her over to the elevator, the doors sliding open as I press the button. We step in and they close, blocking out the parking garage and mutilated dog.

As the elevator starts to rise, the careful control I've been holding on to slips. Fear grips me for a heart-wrenching second, and I can't stop myself as I reach for Grace, needing to feel her in my arms, needing to know that she's safe and real and alive. Her heart thuds against my chest and as she clings to me with a quiet noise, like I'm her salvation.

Fuck, I wish that were true.

So why do I get the feeling I'm dragging her down to hell with me?

"Look at me," I murmur softly. My hands come up to trace the lines of her neck, her chin, brushing her hair back as she lifts her head to meet my gaze. "Are you okay?"

Her arms tighten around my body, fingers entwining behind my back and gripping me closer, as if I'm her anchor and she's not going to let go. Jesus, I hope she never does. It's madness being with her, another storm within the already raging tempest of my life.

But I want her.

More than anything, I *want* to be her anchor. Not just when she's reeling from a death threat, but always.

"I'm fine," she says, her voice trembling only a little. Her hazel eyes shimmer, but her jaw is set resolutely. "I'm still alive, aren't I? I'm still here."

I can see it in her eyes that she's trying to pull it together, trying to keep herself from breaking, and pride fills me. It takes a certain kind of person to be able to stay as calm as she is under this much stress, and she's fucking strong.

Stronger than me. Stronger than any of us.

"That's my girl," I say, voice dropping and growing rougher.

Her breath catches at my words, and for once, I don't fucking question the feelings churning between us. I don't stop myself from leaning down and pressing a kiss to her lips, palming the back of her head. Her fingers flex against my back with the contact as she rises up to meet me and kisses me back, melting against me.

I force myself to pull away just before the elevator door opens, heart thudding in my chest. Grace steps out of my arms and away from me, and I lead the way down the familiar corridor to my father's office.

He looks up as we step inside, his expression sharp and alert. A threat against Grace may not concern him the same way it does me, but since she's under the protection of the Novak Syndicate, any move against her is an attack on all of us. He'll take this seriously.

Thank fuck.

"Hale. Grace. Come in."

He gestures for us to enter, and I usher Grace across the room. She sits in the same chair as last time, her face impassive and her expression blank.

My girl. My brave fucking girl.

Another surge of pride fills my chest, but I focus on business.

"The dog was dead by the time I got there," I explain, not sitting down. My father already knows the basics, but I fill him in on the rest. "Zaid, Lucas, and Ciro are bringing it in. We can run forensics, but it was in bad shape. I doubt we'll find anything. We do know for certain it was a threat aimed at Grace."

I pull a small, clear plastic bag out of my pocket and slam it down on the desk. The gesture is more forceful than I mean for it to be, but my self-control is fraying. Just seeing the engraved letters in the small metal disc makes my blood boil.

My father looks at the dog tag that reads *Grace* with narrowed eyes, but his face stays impassive.

"We scoped the property and surrounding area as well," I add. "Nothing."

For a long moment, my father just stares at the bloodstained dog tag in the plastic bag. Then he finally looks up at me. "I'd like to speak with Grace. Alone."

I can feel Grace stiffen by my side. We're not even physically touching, but I'm so aware of her that I can sense the change in her posture, hear the slight hitch in her breath.

My own breath stills in my lungs. I've never disobeyed a direct order from my father, but I'm seriously considering doing it right now. I trust this man and respect him, but when it comes to Grace, trust only goes so far.

A soft hand reaches for mine, wrapping around my fingers. The heavy thud of my heart slows as Grace looks up at me.

"I'll be fine," she murmurs.

I glance back at my father, my hand still gripping Grace's tightly. He holds my gaze, not glancing down at our joined hands, but I know he's aware of the gesture.

"She's right," he says. "She'll be fine. I won't hurt her, Hale. I just want to talk."

I look back at the woman beside me, wanting to tell her she doesn't have to agree to this, but I know she's strong. As much as I want *her* to trust *me*, I know I need to return that trust. I need to believe her when she says she can handle this.

"I'll be right outside the door," I say, squeezing her hand in one last reassurance.

I give a look to my father that says *don't do anything stupid* before I turn and stride to the door, leaving them in the room.

Alone.

GRACE

THE DOOR CLOSES with a soft *click*, and it's like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the space.

I'm alone with Damian Novak.

That thought sends my heart racing, my pulse thundering in my ears. I could tell by Hale's hesitation that he didn't want to leave any more than I wanted him to. But it was a direct order from his father, and as much as it terrifies me, I have to know what Damian wants to say to me without his son present.

I'm starting to realize how deeply entangled I am in all of this. I need to learn everything I can, to prepare myself for what might be coming. I can't afford to live with my head in the sand just because this world sometimes scares the shit out of me.

I'm in it now. I have to do what it takes to survive.

And Hale wouldn't leave me if he didn't completely trust his father, I remind myself. He knows I'll be safe, so I just need to have faith in his judgment.

Deep down, I know I *do* have faith in him. Hale saved my life, and that means something.

Still, it doesn't make Damian any less terrifying. He doesn't seem like the kind of man to make decisions rashly or emotionally. I don't think he'd initiate violence unless it was needed, but that doesn't make me any more safe, because violence becomes necessary suddenly and unexpectedly in this world, no warning attached.

I straighten my spine, staring him in the eye, careful not to appear too defiant. There's a fine line between respectful and arrogant, between self-preservation and meekness—I need to show him that I'm willing to stand up for myself without directly challenging his authority.

He looks at me thoughtfully, his handsome features unreadable. He looks so much like Hale that it almost hurts to look at him. It's like peering into the future, seeing Hale as an older man leading a powerful mafia organization—and every time I think about the future, I wonder where I fit into that picture.

Do I still have a place here?

Am I even alive?

Damian considers me in silence for a moment, then finally lets out a sigh.

"All these years," he begins, "I've always wondered *why*."

Knowing that it's not a question, I don't say anything, just wait for his next thought. I'm not sure what exactly Damian hopes to draw out of me with this conversation, and it's certainly not about the dog at this point.

"Samuel was one of my best men. He'd been with us practically since the beginning—years and

years. Since before you were born, Grace. He was more loyal and dedicated than any other syndicate man I'd ever met."

Damian's description of my dad isn't wrong. My dad *was* the most loyal man I ever knew. Loyal to a fault. When I was growing up, he somehow managed to be everything all at once: loyal to his work, but completely loyal to his family as well. I never felt like he neglected us for his mafia friends or business. He was always there, being the best father anyone could have asked for.

At least, that's what I always thought. I honestly don't know how many of my memories are even real anymore. Maybe it was all just a lie.

"I was thinking about promoting him to be my second," Damian says, resting his elbows on his desk as he leans forward. "That's how valued he was to me. And then he just threw it all away." His eyes narrow. "He spit in the faces of the men who had been family to him. He betrayed them and me. He ratted out my brother and managed to get away with it. Ran into the night and just disappeared."

Until now, I think. Until my wedding.

"He was a traitor and a coward." Damian's voice turns to steel.

That stings. I want to stand up for my father, I want to tell the man before me that he was no coward, but the truth is, I don't know that. I have no idea who my father was anymore. I don't know what he was thinking, what he was planning. Even the events that caused us to flee Chicago are a mystery.

And that's what hurts most. That's what makes it feel like someone's stabbed me in the heart, twisting the knife and carving me out—my father didn't trust me enough to tell me whatever the hell it was he was doing.

Because he was obviously doing *something*.

"Why?" Damian asks. He balls his hand into a fist, slamming it sharply against the desk. "Why did he do it?"

I hesitate to answer, my thoughts running a mile a minute. Damian could be trying to walk me into a trap with my own tongue—I don't know what he's trying to get from me or what his motivation is, and saying the wrong thing could end up with me dead.

I find myself shrugging, grasping for the right words.

"I'm not quite sure," I say. "Honestly, I feel a bit betrayed by him too at this point. I'm not sure what to believe anymore. There's so much that I'm only just now realizing I didn't know about him. So many questions I might never get answers to now that he's dead."

And *that* makes me want to kick my feet against the desk in frustration, cry until I'm hoarse. It's a swelling of bitterness and resentment that twists my stomach into knots, that catches me off guard and makes it hard to breathe.

"I'm mourning him and hating him at the same time for not trusting me with any of that," I admit quietly.

Damian gives me a heavy look. "Perhaps it's better that way, Grace. Knowing his secrets could have put you in more danger than you realize. Ignorance, in your case, may save your life."

He's right.

Knowing what my father was doing—if he was doing anything—would have put me up against the Novak syndicate as an enemy. I was already in that territory at first, just by being Samuel's daughter. How much more would Hale and his men have hated me, tortured me, punished me, had I known what my father was doing?

For some reason, my mind flashes back to *Ciro's* hands around my neck, locked in the night terror—being pinned beneath him with no way out.

And what about those early days of being tied to the bed, constantly monitored in everything I did?

I swallow.

I don't want to know how things could have been, had I been part of whatever my father was involved in. Had I known anything more than I already know. Which is, frustratingly, nothing.

"The most terrible thing about trust, Grace," Damian says, looking at me closely, "is that the more deeply it's earned, the worse it is when it is broken."

I hesitate to answer. I'm sure Damian is thinking about the mole in his organization, and my fingers curl around the armrest of the chair as I hold his gaze. Does he think I might have had something to do with this? Does he think I orchestrated this?

"Your father's betrayal changed the way I run my business. It changed the way I view every person around me." For a second, something like pain flashes in Damian's eyes. "I vowed to myself that I would never let someone close to me betray me again. I would never let myself be blind to the signs right in front of me."

His jaw tightens, and I hold my breath.

"And yet," he continues, "despite the promise I made to myself, someone is working against my organization from the inside. Someone has betrayed me again."

"I don't know who it is." I shake my head. "I don't. But I want to, and if I can help you find this person, I will."

He nods, acknowledging my words, but his expression doesn't soften.

"My son cares for you," he says slowly. "I can see it in the way he looks at you. He trusts you. So I am willing to extend some of my trust to you as well."

Relief rushes through me at Damian's words, but he holds up his hand, his expression hardening. "However, should you betray his trust, it won't matter if Hale forgives you. I never will."

My heart thuds in my chest, weighing his words.

I never will.

No one wants to have an enemy like Damian Novak, and I feel a little sick at the thought of what he would do to me if I betray his family. I know he's just looking out for his son, but that doesn't make his threat any less real. If anything, it's *more* real.

The games have ended, and it's life or death now.

"I owe Hale my life," I find myself saying, my voice steady despite my racing pulse. "But how I feel about him... goes beyond that. He's learned to trust me, and I've learned to trust him too. I would never betray him—not because of a debt owed, but because I care about him. Even if he hadn't saved my life, I would never do anything to hurt your son."

My chest constricts a little as I speak. That's the closest I've come to admitting out loud how deep my feelings for Hale are becoming, and it's terrifying and exhilarating to say it. My words hold nothing but truth, and I think Damian knows that. The corners of his mouth curve up in a surprisingly genuine smile, softening his features and giving him an almost comforting look.

"Thank you, Grace."

He gives me a nod, and I'm surprised to find a small smile tug at my own lips. I realize I'm extremely lucky to be given the benefit of the doubt, to be dealt with as if I'm a part of the Novak Syndicate, even though it was my father's actions that almost brought the whole organization down.

Because Hale cares about me.

And no matter how confusing things are between the two of us, his father can see that.

Damian stands from his chair, moving to the other side of the room. He opens the door and calls

his son back in.

Hale's gaze locks with mine the second he walks into the room. He's as edgy as a caged animal as he stalks over to me, scanning my body for harm. I shake my head, letting him know I'm all right. Satisfied, he lets out the smallest huff of a breath, his shoulders relaxing as he sits in the chair next to mine.

Damian resumes his place behind the desk, sinking into his large chair with a heavy sigh.

"Did you have a good chat?" Hale asks as he looks across the desk, and I'm surprised by the acidic tone of his voice. I've always gotten the impression that he and his father are close, and I know he respects Damian as a leader.

The older man nods. "We did. I just needed to be sure Grace and I were on the same page." His gaze flicks to me. "And I believe we are."

I reach out and rest my hand over Hale's, hoping to calm him down and convince him everything really is okay. I wouldn't have done it earlier, but now that my cards are all on the table, I don't feel like I need to hide the fact that there's something between Hale and me. Damian already knows.

Hale surprises me by flipping his hand over, catching mine in his strong grip and squeezing it. I squeeze back as Damian regards both of us seriously.

"We need to figure out who the mole is," Hale's father says. "This is the second attack on Grace, so whoever is going after her is either trying to get to us through her, or she has something they want. Either way, she's under our protection, so an attack on her is as good as an attack on the Novak Syndicate."

"They're getting bolder." Hale curses. "It's a ballsy fucking move, dropping that dog off while we were all at home."

"Agreed. We need to figure out who it is before they do something worse than just sending threats." Damian runs a hand through his hair, a gesture I've seen Hale do dozens of times. "And we need to get this Boston deal secured. The influx of money will position us well against other syndicates that are getting too big to continue unchecked."

"The Rooks." Hale says it like a statement, not a question. His father nods.

"We're close. Myles and Frank are in Boston now, and with any luck, the negotiations will go well." Damian drums his fingers on his desk. "If and when it goes through, I'll have you and your team handle the logistics. I'm tightening up operations until we figure out where the fucking rat is."

"Good. We'll be ready."

Damian leans back, nodding. "I'll let you know if we pull anything useful from the dog or the tags." He glances at the bloody bag on the desk, then back at me. "In the meantime, keep Grace safe. Whoever this is, whatever they want with her, I don't want them to get it."

A prickle of fear runs down my spine at the grim tone of his voice.

Yeah. That makes two of us.

GRACE

MAYBE NOWHERE IS TRULY SAFE.

It's a strange realization. Even when I was truly being held prisoner—hell, *especially* then—this house felt like a fortress. Impenetrable.

But it wasn't, was it? I remind myself. I found a way out, which means someone else could find a way in.

Of course, if they do, they'll have four mafia men with itchy trigger fingers to deal with. I keep reminding myself of that. Since the dinner last week that ended with the dead dog and my tense meeting with Damian, the men have been relentless. At least one of them is always hovering over me, watching me. Not because they don't trust me, but because they don't trust anyone else. Each of them seems driven by a renewed need to *protect*, aimed directly at me.

Ciro and Zaid combed through every bit of security from that day, but the cameras were expertly blacked out, leaving no evidence for us to trace. One of Damian's men ran forensics on the dog's body—a task I do *not* envy—but that didn't yield anything either.

I've stopped hiding away in my room like I did at first. I think the guys feel better when they can keep an eye on me. And I'm not sure when it happened, but I've stopped feeling like I need to tiptoe around the house. I feel more comfortable here than I used to, as if it's become my space too.

The five of us are gathered in the living room in the late afternoon when Hale's phone rings. He stands from the couch as he pulls it out of his pocket, answering it briskly. His face is a stone wall of emotion, but I'm learning to read the smallest shifts in his features, the way the blue of his eyes seems to brighten when he's happy.

Whatever news he just got, I'm pretty sure it was good.

"The deal has gone through with Boston," he says, hanging up. His serious expression cracks as a broad smile spreads across his face.

"Fuck, yeah." Zaid claps Lucas on the back, and his brother beams at him.

Ciro stays quiet, but in his own way, I can tell that he's pleased too.

"That's great." I grin. From the conversations I've overheard, I've gathered that this is no small deal, and one they've been working relentlessly toward for months.

"There's a celebration tonight at The Blind Pour," Hale says, still grinning.

A strange sort of nostalgia rises up in me as he says the name, and my heart squeezes.

The Blind Pour is an old vintage bar owned by Damian. Unlike the sophistication of Onyx Cocktail Club, The Blind Pour is all dark wood and old-school furnishings. I have plenty of memories of going there as a younger girl, and even now, I could easily get lost in the dozens of

memories I have from that place.

But this is their celebration, not mine. I'm sure one of them will stay behind to keep an eye on me, but I haven't left the house except to meet with Damian since the night I tried to escape.

A sharp pain twists in my chest, and I stand up, trying to hide the way my smile falters. I don't know why the idea of not being part of their celebration hurts, but it does.

"I'm gonna go upstairs for a bit. I'm glad the deal came through. You deserve a win," I tell Hale, brightening my features as much as I can before slipping out of the room.

My bedroom feels too quiet and empty as I settle on the bed with one of the books *Ciro* brought me a few days ago. I find that I miss being downstairs with the men. Even when we're not talking, it's just nice to feel their presence around me. I've gotten used to it, and not just because I feel safer with them around.

I just feel... *better* with them around.

Refusing to let myself dwell on that little bubble of pain in my chest, I focus on the pages in front of me, getting lost in my book for the next couple of hours.

"What are you doing?" Hale's deep voice comes from the doorway, making me start. "Hiding up here like this?"

I set down the book, irritation spiking when I see him casually leaning up against the doorframe, a smirk on his face. His warm, lazy eyes make me think of things I shouldn't think of. His posture and expression make him look like a lion warming itself in the sun.

Watching its prey.

Waiting to pounce.

"Well," I say, punctuating the word, embarrassed by how irritated it comes out. "I don't have anything better to do tonight than have a quiet evening in, so I figured I wouldn't waste time getting started."

He takes an easy step into the room, watching me. "Who says you're not coming with us?"

"Well—"

"Did I ever say you weren't invited?" He lifts an eyebrow, stopping a few feet away from the bed. "Or did you just assume we wouldn't want you there?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "That's exactly what I assumed, actually."

The irritation is still simmering under my skin, and I don't bother hiding it anymore. Why would I assume I was invited when I'm still technically a prisoner here?

Truthfully, it doesn't feel like that at all anymore inside these walls. But outside? Among the other members of the Novak Syndicate? In front of Damian?

To anyone but the four men who've gotten under my skin and inside my heart, all I am is a pawn of the syndicate. I'm a piece on a chess board, not an actual part of their organization. Not someone to be welcomed with open arms.

Hale's face softens, the teasing expression leaving his eyes. "I'm sorry. Of course you assumed that." He sits on the edge of the bed, his hand coming to rest on my thigh as he looks at me. "Grace. Do you *want* to come with us?"

He's asking. Truly asking. And I have a feeling that whatever answer I give, he'll honor it.

I take a second to consider, weighing everything my answer means. Then I nod. "Yes. I do."

Hale's face splits into a wide grin, and he gives my leg a little squeeze before he stands up. "I'll be right back."

Before I can say anything or question where he's going, he strides out of the room. A few moments later, he walks back through the door with a black garment bag slung over his shoulder. He has a large

box in one hand, and he sets it down on the end of the bed before pulling something from his pocket and placing it on the vanity. He drapes the garment bag over the chair, then turns to find me watching him.

He shrugs, looking almost bashful. "I was hoping you'd want to come. So I got you a dress just in case."

I blink, a little stunned. I sort of assumed that his decision to come up here and invite me to the celebration tonight was a spur-of-the-moment decision, but it obviously wasn't. And even though he left the decision up to me, he's made it beyond obvious that he truly does want me there.

"Thank you, Hale," I say. "You didn't have to do that."

He smiles. "I wanted to. I think it'll look amazing on you. Take your time getting ready. We'll be downstairs."

There's something easy about his expression as he moves toward the bed again, like he's finally letting go a little bit. We're still no closer to finding the mole, but I can tell that having this deal go through is one less weight on his back, one less problem nagging at him.

"Don't think you're not one of us now, Grace," he murmurs. "Because you are."

His fingers capture my chin, and he presses a soft kiss to my lips before leaving me behind in the room, shutting the door behind him.

As soon as he's gone, I carefully set the bag on the bed and unzip it, revealing a short black dress. It's somewhere between elegant and sexy, and the feel of the fabric alone tells me it's insanely expensive.

I tug at my clothes, but stop, glancing up at the door and half expecting one of the men to barge in and demand to search me in case I'm hiding something.

My heart does a little flutter inside my chest, half fear and half arousal. So much has changed since the day I stripped for Lucas to show him I wasn't hiding anything—and to distract him from the phone I had hidden in the bathroom.

But it's all changed so fast that it's hard for my heart and mind to catch up. Hard for me to trust that the way things are now will last, that the men won't go back to distrusting me and tying me up any second.

Things are different now, but that doesn't mean I can be any less careful.

When no one bursts through the door, I slip out of my jeans, sweater, and bra and pull the dress over my head. The soft, slightly stretchy fabric slides down my body, fitting me like a second skin. The dress is off the shoulder on one side, highlighting my collarbones and long neck, and a slit running up the thigh exposes just a tease of skin when I take a step.

The pair of black Louis Vuitton heels match the dress perfectly, adding a few inches to my height when I slip them on. I shouldn't be surprised the outfit is so well put together. All of these men know how to dress, and in the mafia, appearances matter.

The bruises and scrapes from my fight with Brian have all disappeared, and even the gunshot wound in my side has healed nicely. The evidence of the battles I've fought are nothing more than tiny scars as I examine myself in the mirror. My ensemble makes me feel sophisticated and sexy, like a woman who demands the attention of the room.

An almost giddy feeling fills me as I sit down at the vanity, applying a quick touch of makeup, darkening my eyes a little to match the dress and the scene we're about to walk into. I'm not sure why I suddenly feel so excited to be included, but there's something about getting ready like this that reminds me of the old days.

I apply a bold red lipstick and add the simple diamond earrings Hale left on the vanity, finishing

the look. When I stand up to give myself one last look in the mirror, my eyes widen a little as I take in my reflection, surprised by what I see.

I look... happy.

There's a glow on my cheeks that isn't from makeup, and my hazel eyes are shining. The bruises on my neck have faded completely, and the dress flatters my figure. I look confident and elegant.

I feel like myself.

But what does that say about who I am?

I glance away from the mirror quickly, as if not looking at my reflection will make the question go away. Luckily, there's a gentle rap on the door before Ciro presses it open, and I don't have to linger in those thoughts long.

He looks at me, eyebrows lifting as he not-so-subtly gives me a once-over, from the top of my head to my feet. He swallows as his gaze snaps back up to my eyes, his fingers twitching at his side.

"Ready?" he asks gruffly.

The tone of his voice almost hurts—there's anger in it, although it's not directed at me. It's all directed inward. I can see him holding himself back, still afraid of what lives inside him and what he could do to me.

I hate it.

I know I can't fix it or battle his demons for him, but I still wish he didn't feel like he was going to hurt me all the time.

Walking toward him slowly, I offer him a small smile. His eyes crinkle a little at the corners, his lips twitching as if he wants to return the smile but doesn't quite know how. Or doesn't think he should.

Refusing to let that crush me, I tentatively slip my arm through his, hoping the small gesture doesn't do more harm than good.

"I'm ready."

I still have to look up to meet his gaze, despite the heels.

His body stiffens at my touch, and I half expect him to push me away or step back. But although his jaw stays clenched, he rests his hand over mine in the crook of his elbow and leads me from the room. There's something so formal and gentlemanly about the gesture, so completely at odds with Ciro's dark, tattooed appearance, that it makes my chest squeeze. Even though he doesn't relax as we make our way down the stairs, he maintains the contact between us, and I count it as a win.

Lucas, Zaid, and Hale wait at the bottom of the steps. Just like Ciro, they're each dressed in perfectly tailored suits, looking better than any three men have a right to. But something looks different about them tonight—they're more relaxed, less on-edge. They all turn around when they hear us, three sets of eyes widening as their gazes rove over my body. None of them bother to hide their appreciation, and my skin flushes hot.

"Damn," Lucas mutters, walking over to me. His green eyes burn with possessive awe as Ciro releases me and steps away. "You're gorgeous, Grace."

Zaid lets out a soft whistle. "Holy shit. I know Lucas calls you princess, but he's got it wrong. You look like a fucking queen."

"Shut up, Zaid." I roll my eyes, my blush deepening.

He grins, his palm splaying across my lower back as he drops his head to press a small kiss to my cheek. When we break apart, I find myself looking toward Hale, who's been silent this entire time. Even as I meet his gaze, he doesn't say anything, but the heated look he gives me from across the foyer says enough on its own. My whole body is feverish under the touch of his eyes, but we don't linger.

“Time to celebrate,” Lucas says, adjusting the lapels of his suit jacket. “At least one fuckin’ thing went right for once. I think that calls for a drink or two.”

GRACE

AS WE STEP into the crowded bar, the men stay close by my side, leading me through the press of bodies.

This must really be a big night for the syndicate, because I see a lot of people I recognize from my previous life as a mafia man's daughter. A group of older men are deep in conversation in one corner of the bar—Damian's captains, the men he trusts most to help him run his organization. I don't know them well, but they were good friends of my father's, so their faces are familiar.

When their gazes shift toward me, it's clear they know who I am too, although the hard looks on their faces make me blanch a little. It makes sense. They were close to my dad, so his betrayal probably hit them almost as hard as it hit Damian. And although Damian's decided to give me the benefit of the doubt for Hale's sake, these men have no such reason to trust me.

Other eyes track our movement as we walk deeper into the bar. As the boss's son, Hale is a fixture at these kinds of things, I'm sure. So it's not him that's drawing people's attention and sparking the whispered conversations.

It's me.

It's *us*.

Traditionally, you attend events like these with your family. The people you most want by your side.

The fact that I've shown up with four men, one on each side of me? No one comments on it, but I know we make a statement. It's as if I don't belong to just one of them, but to all of them.

A warm feeling grows in my stomach at the thought, an addictive little thrill zapping down my spine. The little voice of warning inside me rises up again, reminding me not to believe this, not to get too comfortable.

But that voice is growing quieter and quieter.

We linger around the bar for a moment before Ciro breaks away, disappearing into the shadows at the edge of the room. Zaid and Lucas share a concerned look, but no one says anything. I don't think Ciro's that comfortable with crowds, so no one gives him shit for bailing.

"I need to find Myles," Hale says absently, looking around the room. He taps the bar top. "I'll be back in a little bit." His gaze snags mine. "Will you be okay?"

I'm touched that he even thought to ask. Parties like these always involve more work than actual celebration for the higher-ups in the syndicate, so I'm not surprised he needs to speak to one of Damian's captains. But the fact that he wants to make sure I'm taken care of only reinforces the words he said earlier.

You're one of us now.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." I smile at him, watching his eyes warm in response. "I've got Zaid and Lucas."

"We'll keep an eye on her," Zaid promises, his hand coming to rest on the small of my back. His tone is light as usual, but there's something in the way he touches me that lets me know he's being serious. These men trust their mafia brethren, but especially with the threats against me and the mole still uncovered, I doubt I'll be left alone for even a second tonight.

I'm not sorry about that. I feel safer when the men are with me.

Hale glances at me again, a regretful look crossing his face. He drops his head, and I expect him to press a kiss to my cheek like Zaid did earlier—but instead, his warm, full lips find mine.

I inhale his sweet clove scent as our kiss lingers for a moment. This is a statement too, a message to every person in the bar, and my heart kicks in my chest at the implications of what we're doing.

When he pulls away, a small smile tilts his lips. "Be good, Grace."

He slips away into the crowd, and Lucas and Zaid both shift closer to me in a protective gesture.

"Want something to drink?" Lucas asks, glancing down at me with a wolfish grin.

"Yeah, why not? I'll have a—"

"Glenfiddich," Lucas finishes, turning to the bartender, Charlie. "Three of 'em. Neat."

The broad-shouldered man behind the bar nods. I recognize him from when I used to come here with my parents, and I grin when he catches my gaze and smiles. He was always laid-back and friendly, and it doesn't look like the past six years have changed that.

"How did you know?" I ask Lucas, cocking my head.

"That's what you always got."

"What if I was going to ask for something else tonight?"

"Were you?" He grins.

When I don't respond, his smile widens. Charlie comes back quickly with the drinks, and when I take a sip of mine, I almost moan with satisfaction.

"See?" Lucas takes a sip of his own drink, looking cocky as fuck.

I flip him off, rolling my eyes as I chuckle. The dimly lit bar is crowded and boisterous. It's a neighborhood establishment with quite a few regulars, but tonight, everyone in the place is connected to the Novak Syndicate. Zaid and Lucas aren't pulled away by the same duties Hale was, so we settle in at a small high-top table near the bar, drinking and talking. Conversation rolls off our tongues easily as we slip back into old habits and memories.

For the first time in a long time, I feel completely relaxed. Every fucked up thing that's happened over the past several weeks seems to slip away, leaving just the pleasant buzz of the alcohol in my veins and the feel of Zaid's shoulder brushing against mine. The sound of Lucas's infectious laugh. The smell of cigar smoke and the hubbub of voices.

We finish our first drinks and get another round, and by the time I've finished my second whiskey, it's becoming harder and harder not to notice how close we're all standing, gathered around the small table. Every time our bodies touch, heat flares inside me, and we seem to be touching more and more.

"You know..." My words trail off as I hold up my empty drink, looking at Lucas through the patterned glass. His handsome face is distorted, spinning slightly at the edges. "You know what I've always wondered?"

"What have you wondered?" His green eyes darken as I lower the glass, his gaze dipping to my mouth.

"What would have happened in the kitchen that night?"

My voice is quiet, but it doesn't matter. It's only meant for two people, and they can hear my words just fine. Zaid's eyes widen a little, and my pulse picks up as both he and Lucas lean closer to me. A demanding ache is building in my core, and I shift my weight, squeezing my thighs together to try to relieve it.

"What would've happened?" Lucas echoes my question, his voice thick.

"If I hadn't mentioned what Brian said. If we hadn't gotten distracted." I lick my suddenly dry lips. Bringing this up seemed like a great idea in my tipsy state a moment ago, but now I feel inexplicably nervous. "What would've happened? Between the three of us?"

Zaid makes a noise low in his throat, and when I turn my gaze toward him, the look in his eyes goes straight through my body, better than any drink. He downs the rest of his whiskey in one swallow, then sets his glass on the table top with a heavy thud. His hand wraps around my wrist, and he tugs me through the crowd toward the back of the bar, Lucas right behind us.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my breath coming faster.

Zaid stops, and for a moment, I'm pinned between his body and Lucas's in the middle of the dark bar. They're both breathing harder too, and when Zaid turns around and reaches up to drag his knuckles down the side of my face, my pussy clenches.

"You wanted to know what would've happened, kitten," he murmurs quietly.

Lucas's lips brush the shell of my ear, his body hot and hard behind mine. "So we'll show you."

GRACE

ANTICIPATION SURGES through me like a shot of straight adrenaline as the three of us slip out of the main room of the bar, heading down a hallway toward the back. I almost trip over Zaid's feet in my impatience to get where we're going, and he laughs as he stops in front of a door and tries the handle.

He grins triumphantly when it opens, then turns and hooks an arm around my waist, pulling me through. Lucas shuts the door behind us, and I blink in the dim light. We're in what looks like a small office or break room. The overhead lights are off, so the only illumination comes from a small window on the far side of the room and the ambient light that spills in from the crack under the door.

"The lock's broken," Zaid says, a grin in his voice. My eyes are still adjusting, so it's hard to make out his features. "I *thought* we'd be able to get in here."

"But that means we have to be quiet, princess," Lucas murmurs, coming up behind me and enclosing me between their bodies again. "We can't lock the door, so if we don't want to get caught, we have to make sure no one hears us. Can you do that?"

Honestly, it already feels like my heart is beating so loud that every patron at The Blind Pour should be able to hear it. But I nod, even though I'm not sure it's a promise I can keep. "Yes."

"Huh. She sounds way too sure about that." Zaid chuckles, running his hands over the bare skin of my arms. "I think we should make it harder for her, don't you?"

"Definitely." Lucas's voice is a low purr, and he nuzzles my ear as he speaks, nipping at my earlobe and sending a shock of sensation to my clit.

My back arches, my shoulders leaning against his chest even as my hips grind against Zaid's, the feel of his growing erection making my blood burn like fire. When the three of us were together as teenagers, it was one of the hottest nights of my life—but we were kids, still figuring out what we liked, what felt good.

We're not kids now.

And as Zaid and Lucas each start to move their hands over me, kissing my neck, my shoulders, and my lips, I can already feel the difference between then and now. The one thing that stays the same, the one thing that's just how I remember it, is the way I begin to lose track of whose hands are whose.

Especially with the light so dim, all of my attention focuses in on what I can feel, not what I see.

And I feel so fucking much.

They trade me back and forth between them, spinning me in their arms as they take me apart kiss by kiss. Zaid's lips trail down my neck, and I shiver as I kiss Lucas deeper. Then they trade again, and Lucas reaches around to cup my breasts through the soft fabric of my dress as Zaid's wicked tongue explores my mouth. I don't try to keep track of who I'm facing or what each man is doing. I just let

myself fall into it, kissing and groping them back as our quiet breathing and soft groans fill the room.

When I'm turned around again, Lucas wraps his arms around me from behind, pulling me tight to him so that my back is to his chest. His large palms splay over my stomach, and he nips at my neck as he begins to gather the material of my dress, dragging the stretchy fabric up my body.

My eyes are adjusting to the darkness, and I watch as Zaid's shadowy form kneels before me. I gasp when he reaches under my dress and hooks my panties with his fingers, dragging them over my hips and down my legs. He helps me step out of them, and as he tucks them away in his pocket, Lucas drags my dress up even higher, baring my naked pussy for his brother.

"Fuck, Grace." Zaid's voice is husky, and he slips a finger through my folds, groaning when he feels how wet I am already.

Hell, I think I was soaked the second he took my hand and started leading me toward the back room.

Lucas keeps my dress bunched in one hand as his other hand moves upward, sliding over my breasts before diving beneath the angled neckline. He pinches my nipple just as Zaid leans forward and licks a long line up my slit. I let out a breathy cry, and Lucas chuckles.

"I love that sound. Shit, I almost don't care if we *do* get busted back here. I just want to hear you make that noise again."

Zaid murmurs something I can't quite hear, and then his hands grip my hips, holding on tight as he begins to lap at me in earnest. His tongue slides over my clit, and I bite my lip to hold in the sounds that try to pour from my mouth. My hips shift as I press myself harder against Zaid's mouth, and he responds by picking up the tempo of his tongue, flicking the tip over my sensitive bud.

"Fuck!" I hiss, and Lucas groans behind me.

"I can smell you, Grace," he whispers, his voice pouring into my ear. "I can smell how turned on you are."

I'm too turned on to be embarrassed by the fact that the room already smells like sex. I can feel liquid dripping down my thighs, a combination of my arousal and Zaid's saliva, and it's so perfectly filthy that it makes my core clench, my clit spasming with a burst of pleasure.

Zaid growls lightly, tightening his grip on my hips and attacking my clit with his tongue. My knees almost buckle as pleasure explodes through my body. Reaching up behind me, I wrap one arm around Lucas's neck, clinging to him to keep myself from collapsing into a puddle.

When Zaid hooks one of my legs over his shoulder, I worry that I really will fall over, but the new angle it gives him on my clit feels too fucking good to stop. So I just hang on to Lucas as tightly as I can, leaning back against him as he devours my neck with hot kisses.

"Come on my brother's face, princess," he murmurs, pinching my nipple again. His hand squeezes and massages my breast with a firm grip that walks the line between pleasure and pain. When I roll my hips against Zaid's tongue again, Lucas groans. "Come for him. Let him lap you up. He's so fucking hungry for you."

Jesus. They definitely didn't dirty talk like this when we were teenagers.

His filthy words seem to travel all the way down to my clit, adding to the barrage of sensations from Zaid's talented mouth. Arching my back and swirling my hips, I finally let myself fall over the edge, shuddering with each wave of my orgasm as I come hard. Another loud cry starts to spill from my lips, but Lucas clamps a hand over my mouth, pressing a kiss to my temple.

"I lied." His voice holds amusement, but something else too. "I don't want anyone to find us back here. Only Zaid and I get to see you like this. This moment is just for us."

I blink, breathing hard as my heart slams against my ribs. The possessiveness in his tone makes a

little thrill go through me, and as Zaid straightens in front of us, I reach behind me with my free hand and palm Lucas's cock.

Zaid kisses me, letting me taste myself on his tongue, and as my foot finds the floor again, I unwind my arm from around Lucas's neck. I reach down, my fingers fumbling with the button and fly of Zaid's suit as the hand behind me works to free his brother's cock too. They both help me a little, and then they both let out satisfied groans of their own as I wrap a hand around each of them.

They're almost exactly the same size, although Lucas's cock is a little thicker. My breath comes faster as I stroke them, spreading the beads of precum that ooze slowly from their shafts.

"This is not what I thought would happen when Hale invited me to come with you guys tonight," I say breathlessly, letting out a soft, almost giddy laugh.

"Me neither." Lucas's voice hitches. "But I'm glad as fuck it did."

Zaid murmurs an agreement as they both begin to kiss and touch me again, their hands wandering over my body as my fists move up and down their cocks. I've never double-fisted dick before, so I'm a little awkward with it at first, but it doesn't take long for me to find a rhythm that has them both groaning. Their hips thrust against my hands, and just as another slick droplet of precum seeps from Lucas's crown, he wraps his hand around my wrist, stopping me.

When he speaks, his voice is rough with desire. "I'm gonna come soon, Grace. Fuck, it feels too damn good. Do you want to stop this here? Or do you want more?"

I know what he's asking. If I want them both to finish in my hands like this, or if I want to take things further.

My clit throbs insistently, and my pussy clenches, desperate for something to fill it up.

"More," I gasp out.

Zaid and Lucas both make pleased noises, the sounds so similar it makes me shiver. Using his grip on my wrist, Lucas tugs my hand away from his cock. His arms band around my waist, and he lifts me easily before taking three long strides and stopping in front of the small couch that lines one wall.

Keeping his arms around me, he sinks down onto it, settling me on his lap with my back to his chest. My legs automatically spread to either side of his thighs, and I feel the hardness of his cock brush against my bare pussy. He groans, and I rise up a little, situating myself over him before I reach down between us and line him up with my core.

As I sink down, all the breath leaves my lungs in a shuddery exhale. Zaid is watching us both, fisting his own cock and stroking it with slow deliberation.

"Let me see you ride my brother," he orders, his mouth dropping open a little as he stares at us.

My skin feels like it might catch fire from the way he's looking at me, but I do what he says, rolling my hips as Lucas's cock slides in and out of me. It feels fucking amazing, and as hot as it is to have Zaid watching us, I want him to feel as good as I feel right now. Without breaking my rhythm, I jerk my chin, gesturing him over.

"Jesus. You're gonna wreck me, aren't you?" He chuckles hoarsely as he steps closer, and I grin up at him as I work my hips against his brother.

"I'm gonna try."

He laughs softly again, then drops his head and kisses me as Lucas's hands find my hips, guiding my movements.

Zaid finally pulls away from our kiss, standing in front of me with his cock jutting forward, hard and thick. His pants are shoved down just far enough to give me access to what I want, and I lick my palm before wrapping my hand around him again. My hips move faster, rising and falling harder as I fuck his brother and stroke Zaid at the same time.

But I still want more. Pleasure is spiraling through my body, erasing any shyness or doubt, and as Lucas holds my hips, I lean forward, taking Zaid's cock in my mouth.

He curses under his breath, his hands delving into my hair. One of my hands braces on his hip, keeping me from toppling forward, while the other grips his shaft, working in tandem with my mouth as I squeeze and stroke him.

It's a slightly awkward position, but both men hold me steady, keeping me perfectly balanced between them as we all move together.

"Fuck, kitten. Oh, *fuck*."

Salt explodes on my tongue as the first jet of cum hits the back of my throat, and Zaid lets out a muffled grunt as he comes. I swallow as fast as I can, hollowing my cheeks and continuing to suck until he grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls me away, helping me straighten up before stepping back. I lean backward against Lucas's chest, feeling him thicken and swell inside me. He's close too, hovering right on the edge.

"That was one of the hottest things I've ever seen," he mutters, his hand sliding down my stomach and slipping under my dress to find my clit. "You're fucking amazing."

He finds the hard, swollen bundle of nerves with the pads of his fingers, massaging in hard circular strokes.

And that's all it takes.

I come hard, my breath catching in my throat as I grip his forearm, rolling my hips over and over.

"That's it. Just like that. God, yes." His body stiffens beneath mine as he slams his hips upward, impaling me even deeper as his cock pulses inside me.

My body melts against his, my head falling against his shoulder as all the bones in my body seem to dissolve. I stare up at Zaid, who's looking down at us in the dim light. My eyes have adjusted enough that I can make out his features and the satisfied gleam in his green eyes.

"Well." One corner of his mouth curves up in a sexy grin. "That was better than I remembered."

I laugh softly. I feel more drunk now than I did when we came in here, and I think it's as much the booze as it is the feeling of *satisfaction* that's radiating through me.

"Yeah," I murmur as Lucas presses a kiss to the side of my head. "It was."

LUCAS

I THINK my dick is officially wrecked.

Officially *owned*.

I don't have any clue what's gonna happen with the four of us and Grace, what kind of future any of us could have with her. But I know I don't want anyone else, and I never fucking will.

Grace is everything I've ever wanted in a woman. She's fierce and determined, loyal and smart as fuck.

And sexy. So fucking sexy.

It takes all my willpower not to blurt out every one of my post-orgasm thoughts as I kiss her temple again, trailing a path with my lips down the side of her face and over the curve of her jaw. I want to whisper in her ear how amazing she is, how she's ruined me for all other women. But I'm afraid if I tell her that shit, I'll scare her off. She's still learning to trust us, and if we're ever gonna have a shot at anything real, we can't push her into anything. Not even a little.

All we can do is show her what she means to us and try to make her understand that even if she was once our prisoner, we want something different now. No matter how complicated it might be, we want her to be one of us.

With a low growl, I turn her head and claim her lips in a kiss before Zaid helps her off my lap. He grabs some tissues from a box on the desk in the corner, and we help her clean up before he pulls her panties from his pocket and goes down on one knee, holding them out like they're a pair of glass slippers.

She laughs as she delicately steps into them, but her laugh turns into a moan as he drags them up her legs. Judging by the length of time he has his hands up her dress, he's doing more than just helping her get her panties back on.

She lets out a sexy little moan, and my brother chuckles. He finally pulls his hands out from beneath her dress, sliding them all the way down to her calves before he releases her and stands up.

"Come here, princess." I tug Grace toward me until our bodies are flush up against each other. "Let's fix this real quick."

She watches through hooded eyes as I wet my thumb, running it under her swollen lips, bringing the crimson lipstick back to perfection. Her plump lips are an even deeper shade of red than they were before, love bitten and pouting already.

"Much better," I murmur, my voice rough.

The party's probably starting to wind down outside. I don't think there's time for another round, but I'm definitely considering it.

She seems to read my thoughts. Her lips part slightly, her body melting against mine. Zaid groans, coming up behind her and shifting her hair over one shoulder to trail kisses down her neck. She squirms and presses back against him, still clinging to me.

Fuck. I just had her, and I already want her again. She's addictive as hell, and if I thought this would get her out of my system, I couldn't have been more wrong.

Not that I want her out of my system. I'm done pretending I want Grace anywhere but in my bed, in my life—in my heart. That's where she fucking belongs, and if she's carved out a space in my brother's heart too, or in Hale and Ciro's, then we'll just have to figure it out.

Maybe, just maybe, there's room enough in her heart for all of us. It almost seems like too much to hope for after the entirely fucked up beginning we all had. How could she ever come to love *one* of us after we stole her from her old life and got her mixed up in all of our shit, let alone all four of us?

Unaware of my thoughts, Grace rises up onto her tiptoes and kisses me again. I grip her hips tightly, kissing her back with everything in me. In this moment, it feels like maybe the impossible could actually happen. Because I don't feel any hesitation, distrust, or coldness in her kiss.

Just warmth.

Sweetness.

Grace.

She grinds against me a little, and it's a tempting-as-fuck invitation, but the last thing I want to do is get caught in here. It would ruin the moment, and although I don't give a fuck if the entire syndicate knows how badly I want Grace, I don't want her to be embarrassed. I don't want her to feel like what happened between the three of us was about anything but *us*.

So I kiss her once more and then regretfully pull away, shaking my head. "Shit's probably winding down out there. We better go find Hale and Ciro."

The disappointed look in her eyes is a boost to my ego, but she nods, biting her lip. "Yeah, you're probably right." She glances at our surroundings, biting her bottom lip as she grins. "I can't believe we did that. In here."

"It just became my favorite room in this whole damn place," Zaid jokes, nipping at her shoulder lightly before stepping back too. Her eyes darken in response, and it takes all my fucking willpower not to grab her, rip her dress off, and bury myself inside her, fuck the consequences. But instead, I focus on putting myself back together, tucking the tails of my shirt back in and slipping my jacket back on.

As I guide her across the room, I love the way she seems to sink into my touch. There's no wariness or stiffness.

Just trust. Desire.

I open the door and lead the way through, with Zaid behind us. We keep her sandwiched between us, and it's not just because we both want to be as close to her as possible. I feel better this way, better knowing that the two of us are surrounding her. Keeping her safe.

We're walking so close together that her body bumps and brushes against mine, but she makes no move to pull herself away as we move back into the main room of the bar.

I don't see Ciro yet, but Hale's gaze quickly finds us from the other side of the room. His eyes narrow a little as he registers Grace between me and Zaid, the way my hands brush against her hips as we move through the crowd.

One look and I'm sure he knows exactly what we were just doing, but I meet his gaze without flinching, for once not giving a fuck about what he thinks. I'm not going to apologize for wanting Grace, and I'm not going to tiptoe around that fact. The truth is, it ultimately all comes down to her

and what she wants. If she wants all of us, I'm willing to share. I'd rather do that than push her away out of some ego-driven need to claim her all for myself.

I wouldn't even consider it if it were anyone but my best friends. But Zaid and I already know how to share, and the idea of Grace with Hale or Ciro... with all four of us? Honestly, it turns me on more than it pisses me off.

I don't know whether Hale and Ciro would be up for sharing, and I can't even fucking contemplate the possibility of this driving a permanent wedge between us all. We're gonna have to work this shit out eventually, but for now, I'm just gonna bask in the sated satisfaction of what just happened.

It's clear that the party is dying down. We were in that back room longer than I thought. Time slipped away while I was distracted by her soft lips and her sweet little noises.

Just thinking about it makes my cock twitch. Fuck, I want to pull her back in there and do it all over again. But the crowd has already thinned a lot, and the remaining people are beginning to gravitate toward the bar's exit. Ciro slips into place beside us as we head out the door.

The night air is cold, but compared to the warmth of the bar, it feels refreshing. Ciro casts a look at Grace before shifting his gaze to me and Zaid, and I know he's noticed her flushed cheeks and swollen lips just like Hale did. His expression is hard to read, but I'm used to that with Ciro. I pay more attention to his body language than his face, since that's what usually clues me in to his mental state.

He doesn't look pissed, thank fuck.

"It's cold," Grace mutters, wrapping her arms around herself. I shrug off my jacket and drape it over her shoulders, and she shoots me a grateful look as she tucks it around herself.

"We should get out of here," I tell my brother and Ciro. "I'll go check in with Hale—see if he's planning on coming with us, or if he needs one of us to stick around."

He may still have business that needs to get done. The Boston deal was big, and securing that trade was a major victory for the Novaks. But it also comes with a lot of logistics to work out, so it's not like we can all sit back and coast from here on out.

Leaving Grace alone with Zaid and Ciro, I make my way through the small crowd gathered on the street, finding Hale in the middle of a conversation with Damian, Myles, Frank and Stanley.

"Where's Leland?" Stanley mutters, turning around. "He should probably hear this."

I find myself unconsciously glancing around at the dying crowd, searching out the other captain. He's one of the few that make up Damian's most trusted circle, and I didn't even realize he was missing from the small group until now. As someone opens the door, I catch a glimpse of him inside the bar.

"He's still inside," I offer. "Talking to Connell."

"Tell him we need him out here," Hale says. His gaze flicks to Grace. "I'll join you and the others in a minute."

I nod, then head back toward the entrance to The Blind Pour. The bar is mostly cleared out, with just a few people left inside.

"Leland." I call his name as I open the door, and he looks over. "Damian is looking for you."

He grunts, throwing back the last of his drink. He claps Connell on the shoulder and then follows me out of the building.

Pop!

A loud sound pierces the night, and then several more follow in rapid succession. Screams erupt as bullets spray, and my senses sharpen as people throw themselves to the ground. One thought rises

above all the others, an urgent drumbeat in my head.

Where's Grace?

GRACE

POP! Pop! Pop!

Before I have time to register what's going on, Zaid is on me, pulling me to the ground and protecting me with his body as the crowd around us scatters. Shouts fill the air, punctuated by the sound of bullets firing. Ciro crouches beside us, and he and Zaid pull me to the side, practically dragging me along the pavement as they seek cover. Lucas is there a second later, joining his brother and Ciro.

Memories of the church come crashing back, making bile rise up my throat. My dress, soaked in blood, my father lying next to me, clutching my veil in his dead hands. The gunfire between two sides of the church, being caught in the middle of it until Hale rescued me...

Hale. Where is Hale?

Unlike at my wedding, my mind is quicker to catch up this time. My heart slams hard against my chest, but I don't let panic overwhelm me.

Hale. I have to make sure he's okay.

"Grace, you need to come with—" Lucas shouts.

"No," I cry, tearing away from them. "I need to—"

The gunshots have stopped. Loud, angry voices still fill the air around me, but no one is shooting. I surge to my feet, pushing through the crowd. I'm searching for Hale without realizing I'm doing it, needing to know if he's okay, trying to figure out what's going on. I refuse to be held back and sheltered by Ciro and the twins, not when Hale might be hurt.

Not when this might have something to do with me.

The image of the murdered dog flashes through my head again, and my stomach turns to ice. Was this shooting another attempt to end my life? To bring down the people who protect me?

As the crowd clears, I finally find him.

And my heart stops.

Hale's ragged shout hits me like a bullet in my own heart. The raw, pained sound dies in his throat as he leans over his father, who lies crumpled on the ground.

Fuck. No.

The scene is too familiar, too painful, but I can't tear my eyes away, taking in the blood on Hale's face and shirt with horror. It's like I'm watching a replay of my own tragedy—only in this version, Hale has been cast as me. I could be watching *myself* hovering over my father, not wanting to believe the truth.

He's dead.

The realization seems to wash over Hale with the same horrifying intensity that it struck me the day my dad died. His back stiffens, and he stands quickly. His face is a mask of grief and rage as he draws his gun and stumbles away from his father's body, already giving directions to his captains.

His captains.

Tires screech from down the street, and several heads whip in that direction.

"Motherfucker. They're getting away!" Hale yells hoarsely, pushing people aside as he runs in the direction of the assailant.

I duck my head at the sound of shots being fired, my heart rate spiking again. Somewhere close by, a car peels away with a loud revving noise. Bullets ping off the frame with a metallic sound—shots I'm assuming Hale is firing.

"Hale!" I try to call out, but the words barely make it past my lips. I stumble in my heels, my legs are shaking so badly. Reaching down, I pull them off my feet and I toss them aside. "Hale!"

I know this is dangerous. Another car could whip by any second, bullets spraying from the window. But I'm terrified that not all of those shots *were* fired by Hale. Did he get hit? Is he bleeding out on the pavement, dying just like his father did?

"Grace!" Zaid wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me back. Ciro and Lucas are right beside him, their weapons drawn and gazes scanning the street.

"Hale," I pant. "Is he—"

"He's okay. We have to keep you safe, Grace. You can't run after him."

I can tell by the rasp of Zaid's voice that he doesn't know Hale is all right. *Nothing* is all right. My heart is still pounding so hard it feels like I might throw up, my thoughts spinning chaotically, but I allow the men to pull me away from the street. It's only when I see the people crowded around Damian and the puddle of blood around his head that I truly absorb the magnitude of what just happened.

Damian Novak, the leader of the Novak syndicate, is dead.

Hale will take his place.

"There." Ciro only says the one word, but it's all I need.

My head whips up, and I turn around at the sound of footsteps, almost sagging in relief at the sight of Hale limping back, still holding the gun at his side. He's favoring his left leg, grimacing, and I have a moment of panic that he got shot.

Then I remember his old injury. He probably exacerbated whatever lingering issues he has in his leg by sprinting flat-out like he did. His face is grim, spattered with blood, as he seeks his new captains out. He doesn't stop for me, only giving me a fleeting look, barely a flicker of his gaze toward me.

Are you hurt? Are you safe? Are you okay?

I want to rush to him and comfort him, but I know it's not my place. It's not the time. Appearances matter in the mafia, and right now, Hale has to keep up an appearance of utter strength.

Damian's old captains are standing over his body, and when Hale reaches them, his voice is cold as ice. "I don't know who the fuck that was, but they got away."

His shoulders are rigid, his back straight, but the hoarseness of his voice makes my heart ache. I know he's trying to hide his grief, but I can hear it in every syllable.

I listen to Hale give his men orders, soldiers falling into place around him at his command. He looks different, and I know it's not just the pain twisting inside his soul.

It's the responsibility.

In the space of a few seconds, the weight of the world just came crashing down on Hale's

shoulders. He's always been a key part of the Novak Syndicate, trusted and relied upon by his father. But the day when he would inherit the mantle of leader was supposed to be a long way off. Damian was supposed to live for decades longer. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

But that doesn't matter.

I know better than anyone that there are no guarantees in this world, and that the life you thought you were building for yourself can change in an instant.

I hate that Hale had to learn that lesson too.

Things move quickly, Hale barking out orders as they clear his father's body and begin to disperse before the cops arrive.

"Lucas, Zaid, take her home," he says, finally looking at me before shifting his gaze to his closest friend. "Ciro, I need you with me."

The look in his eyes is like a punch to the gut. It's empty and haunted, and it takes the air out of my lungs.

And when he turns away from me, he takes a part of my heart with him.

HALE

AS I SETTLE into the leather chair behind the desk that I've never sat behind, numbness spreads through my body. There's a high frequency buzz that seems to fill the room. Or maybe it's in my head. I'm not sure where it's coming from, but it blocks all other noise.

I look down at my hands. They're still streaked with bits of blood, and red stains mar my shirt too. The tips of my fingers and my palms feel too cold, and the sensation spreads up my arms. The feeling of shock has slowly been overtaking my body since the moment I saw the bullet hit my father's head, and now the edges of my vision seem to pulse and darken.

Gritting my teeth, I grip the armrests of the chair to stabilize myself, shifting my focus to the duties I have to perform. My father's body is barely cold. There's been no ceremony, no solemn moment to mark my rise to authority.

It just happens as it happens—me sliding my ass into this chair, everyone falling back into their places as if nothing has changed.

As if the world hasn't shifted on its fucking axis.

Never mind grief, never mind death.

Eventually, they'll read my father's will, they'll hold a service in his honor, but until then, business resumes as normal.

I could let my grief swallow me whole right now. I could stop fighting against it and let it drag me under like a choppy sea. But there are more important things that demand my attention.

Like finding out who the fuck did this to my father, and why the fuck they thought they could get away with it. Because whoever did it, they're going to fucking pay. Not just them. Their sons, daughters, mothers, fathers—anyone associated with the people who did this will be burned to the ground.

Because my father is dead. And I wasn't ready to lose him.

The captains file in one by one, standing in front of the desk, hands clasped behind their backs, respectfully waiting for me.

Leland, Stanley, Myles, and Frank. They're no longer my father's captains, but *my* captains. They no longer report to my father, but me.

Goddammit. I didn't fucking want it this way. I wasn't fucking ready.

I'm not going to be able to grieve like a normal fucking person, so I just need to suck it up and move on with it. There are more important things to think about. I knew that one day I would have to take his job, I was prepared to have him die, even if it wasn't from natural causes.

Is this how she felt?

Grace.

I always come back to her in my thoughts, no matter what.

Is this how she feels?

Overwhelming need for her consumes me. I want to hold her. To be with her. To let her take away the pain that's lodged itself in my soul like a knife. I need the feeling of being *complete* right now, when everything else is so absolutely fucked up.

Ciro is the last to enter the room, not joining the row of men standing in front of me but coming to stand at my right shoulder. Myles betrays no emotion, but I know he doesn't like this one fucking bit. He was my father's second, and he's clearly not happy about losing his position to my best friend. But he'll just have to fucking get over it.

The only person I'm going to have in that role is the man who's always been there for me. *Ciro* was my second yesterday and he'll be my second today. Just because my position in the syndicate has changed, that doesn't mean his will.

I challenge Myles with a glance, daring him to say something, but he wisely keeps his mouth shut.

"The body has been moved to holding until funeral arrangements can be made," I begin, clearing my throat. "We don't want the cops involved—they'll only get in the way of our own investigation, and when we find out who did this, we won't want them standing in the way of our vengeance either. In the meantime, we'll proceed as my father would have wished. You will now be receiving orders from me, and I hope I'll prove myself as worthy of your loyalty as he was."

I give each of them a look, and they square their shoulders, giving stiff nods. They may not like that I've been given power at such a young age, but I'm not planning on stepping aside. This is my family legacy, and I'm going to uphold it no matter what it takes.

My only focus now, the goal that drives me, is to find the mole and take whoever the fuck it is down. Because I have a feeling they're responsible for my father's death.

"Report," I say shortly.

"Nothing was found on any local security cameras," Frank says, stepping forward. "The plates on the car had been stripped to avoid recognition and the vehicle abandoned shortly after. There was no forensic evidence inside of the car. But the shooter wasn't alone, there was evidence of a second person in the car."

They got away too fast.

My leg twinges, pain echoing through my body. If it weren't for my old injury, maybe I could have caught up, shot the fucker before he got away, but my leg prevented me from going faster and avenging my father's death.

Maybe I am too fucking weak to deserve this position.

I grit my teeth, forcing the thought out of my head as Frank continues.

"Whoever was behind this didn't leave a mark behind, and none of our rivals or enemies have stepped forward to claim responsibility. For all we know, it could have been a hit and run."

"Could've been. But I don't think it was," Myles cuts in. "If it were a random hit and run, it wouldn't have been such a clean, quick job. No one else but Damian was shot, and he was shot with precision. They had a plan. A strategy."

Myles speaks the truth, as much as I fucking hate it.

I nod, forcing words past my tight throat. "I agree. Whoever shot my father knew what they were doing. They knew Damian would be where he was, when he was there."

Which means they knew about the deal, the victory, and the party. They knew too fucking much.

The men before me all grow silent at my words. Myles nods in agreement, the movement small.

They've all picked up on the words I didn't say, and I watch their expressions change as they absorb that information.

Someone betrayed us.

Up until tonight, my father kept his suspicions of a mole in our midst buried. The only people who knew were me and my men, Grace, and my father. But after what happened tonight, I can't pretend to be ignorant of the possibility of betrayal. Myles was already reaching the same conclusion as he spoke his thoughts aloud.

"If I may be so bold," Myles interrupts my thoughts, stepping forward. He's a bit older than my father, with a hawkish nose and sharp eyes. "I think there are other questions we need to ask ourselves as we proceed."

"Continue."

I already don't like where this is going, but I'd be a fool to ignore him, even if I hate him for speaking the truth.

"Consider this: *someone* took out Landon first. Ratted him out so he ended up with his ass in jail," Myles says. "Now, Damian's been taken out. I wouldn't call that a coincidence. Someone is out for this syndicate, and I doubt they're going to stop now. Landon's arrest weakened us. Damian's death could cripple us."

My jaw clenches. I resent the implication that I can't run the syndicate as well as my father, but as I replay his words in my head, it strikes me what he's really getting at. Old wounds cut deep, and Myles is one of many who will never forgive or forget what Samuel Weston did to Landon. My father's captains each felt that betrayal on a personal level. My uncle was beloved by many, and everyone took his arrest hard.

"Who's the common link between these two incidents, Hale?" Myles gives me a penetrating look, his dark brows rising. "Who was connected to both events? Maybe we didn't see it directly at first, but you know what I'm talking about."

Grace.

That's who he's insinuating is connected. First, Samuel ratted out Landon, putting the next in line to command the Novak Syndicate in jail. The question has always been—why? Why did Samuel throw away his career, his home, and everything around him for a life on the run?

Because he wanted to bring the Novaks down.

Somehow, he managed to hide his hatred long enough that we wouldn't suspect him. He must've lain in wait for years before he executed his plan with perfect timing and escaped into the night. But Samuel is dead now, which means he couldn't have been directly responsible for my father's death.

But indirectly?

What if he wasn't working alone all those years ago? What if he brought up his daughter to follow in his footsteps? What if she's been lying to me all this time?

My stomach twists as I consider the possibility of what Myles says, what he's hinting at. It's not as far-fetched as I wish it was, and I hate the doubt that spreads through my chest like poison.

Have I let my heart get so fucking caught up in her that I'm ignoring the obvious?

Myles takes a step away from the desk, dipping his head respectfully. He never seemed to think I was strong enough to lead the Novaks—I know he was one of the ones whispering in my dad's ear that I wouldn't be a worthy heir to his empire—but he's been careful to demonstrate his fealty to me in the wake of my father's death.

I watch him as he settles in beside my father's old captains.

He's said his piece, and he's done. But his words are still infecting my mind. I want to speak up in

defense of Grace like I did when we brought her in to meet with my father... but with my father lying dead on a slab somewhere, the words won't come.

Because a tiny part of me wonders if Myles is right.

Did she play me? Did she play us all?

I drag in a breath to clear my head, then change the topic back to what needs to be done right now.

"I want you to spread out, interview everyone," I say. We've got a web of informants throughout the entire city. "I want to know if anyone has seen or heard anything. I also want reports on the movement and activity of all other criminal groups in Chicago over the past three weeks. Big or small, I don't care."

I can tell Myles thinks I'm dismissing his suspicion of Grace and is displeased, but he doesn't say anything. I'm not about to feed into his arrogant satisfaction by telling him that he might be right, not until I've looked into things myself.

A spark of anger ignites in my chest, but I push it down, smothering the flames.

"You may leave. Report back to me tomorrow."

They file out of the office and I gesture to Ciro to follow me out.

Grace comes next.

GRACE

Zaid and Lucas pace up and down the length of the living room. They're both practically radiating nervous energy, and it seems to fill up the whole space, making it hard to maintain my fragile grip on my own emotions.

Everything has completely changed. The world of the Novaks has been turned upside down, around, and back again; power has been challenged and shifted, the perfect balance of the syndicate shaken. The day that no one was ready for has come, and it came with no fucking warning.

My whole body trembles. I'm sitting on the couch, but my knees bounce up and down. I can't keep still any more than the twins can. I blow out a breath, trying to calm the thoughts swirling in my mind. Zaid and Lucas are focused on working out theories, trying to come up with an explanation for the sudden death, but I can't think about anything besides Hale.

The look on his face...

When he leaned over his father's body, I saw something I never wanted to see. I saw *myself* in that same position, months ago, my world forever changed. I saw the blood splattered on my dress, on my face, the hot liquid cooling as it soaked my skin.

Pain.

I've never seen such raw pain in a person as I saw on Hale's face tonight, but what breaks my heart more than anything was seeing it pushed away for duty, for the role that was just shoved upon him. Hale's not going to get a break, he's not going to be given time to grieve like a normal person. He's going to have to bury his feelings so he can step up to the responsibilities of his new position.

And that's just... fucked up.

I just want to go up to my room, crawl into bed and try to sleep away the nightmare, but I doubt Zaid or Lucas will leave my side until Hale gives them orders to. Hell, maybe not even then.

Damian Novak is dead.

My stomach rolls over and over again, replaying what happened in my head—Damian being shot, Hale's cry for help, the chaos that followed. Worse, I can't get rid of the thought that I'm somehow involved in this, that maybe that attack was meant to be another warning for me.

Damian had plenty of other enemies—people who wanted him dead. It might not have had anything to do with me.

I tell myself that, but the words feel hollow, even inside my own head.

Zaid's phone rings, and he answers quickly as he stops pacing. Lucas freezes too, and I look up as Zaid listens for a moment, then murmurs something and hangs up.

"They weren't able to pull anything from security footage." He shakes his head, shoving the phone

back in his pocket. He stripped off his jacket a while ago, and his tie is gone too. The top few buttons of his dress shirt are undone, and he's rolled his sleeves up on his forearms. "Plates were gone, windows tinted. The surveillance videos were basically useless."

"Were they able to get into city surveillance and figure out where the car went?" Lucas asks.

"They're working on that now, but the car was abandoned pretty quickly," he says. "A couple of Hale's shots did enough damage that they had to dump it. And yes, before you ask, they already ran forensics on the car. Nothing."

"Bastard knows how to cover his tracks." Lucas starts pacing again. "This was planned."

It's what I've been thinking too, but I didn't want to say it, didn't want to speak it into existence. At this point, I'm not even sure what would be worse—Damian being a victim to one of the many common and brutal hit and runs in this city, or murdered in cold blood by one of his enemies.

"Whoever it is," Lucas mutters, running a hand through his coppery blond hair, "Hale won't stop until he finds them. None of us will. They aren't gonna last much longer."

"Do you know if there are connections to any of your rival gangs?" I ask, hesitating. I know it's not my place to speak up, but I feel like I need to help in any way I can. "You've probably already considered that, but..."

I trail off, and Lucas and Zaid share a look.

Zaid speaks up first. "Yeah, we've considered it. But we have no evidence to tie it to any of our rivals. Nothing concrete. Damian didn't stand for acts of violence just because someone *may* have acted against us, and I doubt Hale will either. Although..." He shakes his head. "I dunno. I'm not sure where his head's at right now. He's hurt, and he's pissed. Maybe he won't want to wait until we know for sure."

A door slams somewhere in the house, and I'm so wound up that I jump about a foot in the air. Zaid and Lucas both tense, hands drifting toward their weapons. Footsteps echo on the polished floor as Hale storms in, Ciro right behind him.

Hale's gaze finds mine as he steps into the room. He looks like a predator on the hunt with one thing on his mind, and I catch only a flicker of emotion in his deep blue eyes as he strides past Lucas and Zaid, roughly taking my wrist and pulling me up from the couch. Without a word of explanation from him, I follow. Ciro takes a step aside as Hale drags me out into the hallway.

He's not being gentle. He's not being soft. But I didn't expect him to be.

My bare feet slap against the cool floor as I struggle to keep my shaky legs under me, keeping up with his pace.

Even though my wrist is still caught in a possessive hold, I follow him willingly.

Part of me needs this.

This is what I've been waiting for since the moment it happened. I've been waiting for the pain I saw inside him to explode, and I have a strange compulsion to be there when it does. No matter what happens.

He needs me, and in a way, I need him. We're linked by more than the memories of our past now. We're connected by a bond that two people should never have to share, by the twin experiences of seeing our fathers murdered in front of us. Specks of blood still stain Hale's hands and face, although I can see that he's washed most of it off.

My pulse accelerates as we take the stairs two at a time, then turn on the second floor landing. He's taking me toward his room, not mine. The emotions that churn inside of him are infecting me too, pouring into me through the connection of our skin, consuming me like a burning flame.

Fear. Anger. Sadness.

They're not just *his* emotions though. They're mine too. Not only do I feel what he feels, I bear the weight of having done this all already. My own feelings of grief are resurfacing, triggered by the events of the day and adding to the dangerously volatile emotions that already clog my chest.

He pulls me into his bedroom, slamming the door behind us. The curtains are closed, and only a flicker of moonlight penetrates the room, leaving us robed in murky shadows. He presses me back against the closed door, his large frame looming over mine, boxing me in. His hands come to rest on either side of my head, and for a moment, his own head droops. I can hear his sharp breaths as he drags in air through his nostrils, bracing himself against the door.

Then, finally, he looks up at me. But it's not the Hale I know gazing at me. It's not even the grief-stricken Hale I can sense hiding inside him, but a wild, animalistic beast. His lips curl back and his nostrils flare as he narrows his eyes at me. I can hear his heart and my heart thundering to the same beat, a tangible pulse that hangs over the room until he opens his mouth and speaks.

"Tell me you had nothing to do with this."

I blink. My thoughts from downstairs earlier flood back through my head—my worries that I'd been the target of the shooting, not Damian. Or that Damian's murder was somehow connected to whoever tried to kill me.

But that's not what Hale is talking about. He's asking if I *planned* this.

"No. I didn't." I grope for words, not sure how else to say it.

"Tell me you didn't do this, Grace," he growls.

"I didn't—"

I make a move to step toward him, but my words break off as he slams me back against the door, pressing his body into mine.

He grabs my face and forces me to look up at him—to confront the beast behind his eyes, the one trying to tear its way out of his body and slaughter me. His thumb presses into my cheek until I can feel it against my jaw, his entire body shaking with rage against mine.

"I want to hear you say it again," he grates out, tightening his grip even more.

"Hale, I didn't. I swear—"

But he's so far gone, lost inside himself. So swallowed by his grief that a simple *no* doesn't stand a chance against his consuming pain, the tempest that's raging inside of him. It hurts, having to watch him like this, having to see him go through this. His grief is tearing him apart.

And that's what makes me ache the most, because I know how he feels. More than anything, I *know*.

I somehow manage to snake my arms up between us, grabbing his forearms with my hands, trying to bring him back to me with a touch.

"I didn't have anything to do with your dad's death, Hale. I promise you. I swear on my own father's grave. I swear on my life. I know what it's like to lose your parents," I whisper, catching his gaze and holding it. "And I would *never* do that to another person. I'd never do that to *you*."

I watch his throat convulse as he swallows. He wants to believe me. I can see it in the way his eyes track mine, hope hovering just behind the pain.

"The last time Damian and I spoke alone," I say, my voice thick, "I promised him I would never hurt you. I didn't expect him to believe me, but he did. Because I think he could see what I couldn't even admit to myself. He could see how much I care about you. I need you, Hale. I need you to stay with me."

Hale blinks.

His jaw twitches as silence stretches between us. I wait for him to make his next move, wait to

see if he'll allow himself to be brought back. The monster trying to take over his soul puts up a good fight, but finally, his face crumples as *Hale* comes slamming back into his body, the full weight of grief rushing over him.

A broken sob tears from his lips. His large frame shudders from head to toe.

Unable to hold myself back, I wrap my arms around him, going up on tiptoes as I hug him as hard as I can. He hugs me back, pulling me away from the door and into his embrace, his arms banding around me so tightly that I almost can't breathe.

For several long minutes, we stay like that, two separate beings joined into one through raw emotion. Silent tears streak down my own cheeks as we both cry, faces buried in each other's necks.

With a soft noise, Hale loosens his grip a little. His hands come up to frame my face, threading through my tear-dampened hair. For one second, I stare up into his blue eyes, glassy and bloodshot from grief.

Then he crashes his lips against mine, kissing me with everything that's left inside of him.

GRACE

HALE'S KISS is like a hurricane.

It's fierce and consuming, infused with the same desperate need that filled our embrace a moment ago—a need to connect, to claim. To join us together so deeply that no one can ever rip us apart.

I kiss him back just as wildly, grabbing fistfuls of his hair as my back hits the door again. He reaches down and lifts me up, wrapping my legs around him as he pins me against the heavy wood of his door.

His cock is like steel, and he grinds against me, driving me harder into the door with each thrust of his hips. He hardly seems to notice or care that we're both still fully clothed, fucking me against the door anyway, hitting my clit in a way that makes me groan into his mouth.

But it's not enough. I could come like this—in fact, I'm close already—but it's not enough. I want him closer. I want him inside me.

Maybe he decides the same thing, because finally, he growls in frustration and yanks me away from the door, holding me against him as he strides across the room. He throws me down on the soft mattress and is on me a moment later, his large body covering mine as he finds my lips again. He grabs one wrist and then the other, pinning them over my head as his weight bears down on me.

I can't move. I can't wrap my arms around him or slide my hands over his skin, can't plunge my fingers into his hair. All I can do is kiss him back, panting and gasping every time our lips break apart. My legs wrap around his waist, holding him against my body, and I arch my back, smashing my breasts against his chest as my nipples peak.

“Fuck. Need you. Now.”

The grunted words are barely words at all, but I don't need to hear anything else as Hale rips his lips from mine and sits back on his heels suddenly, reaching down to tear off my dress.

It goes flying across the room as Hale drops his head again, nuzzling and lapping at my breasts. His teeth clamp down around my nipple, hard enough to pull a ragged cry from my lips, and I grab his head in both hands, practically crushing his face to my chest as pain-infused pleasure travels through my body in sharp jolts. He bites my nipple again before soothing it with his tongue, drawing my breast into his mouth in a deep pull. When he switches to the other side, my eyelids flutter shut, my hips rocking against his as sensation consumes me.

His hands are already moving farther down my body, fingers hooking the waistband of my panties before he yanks them down over my hips. He sits back again to slide them off, and before the small scrap of fabric has even hit the floor, his face is buried between my legs.

My thighs clench, instinctively trying to clamp around his head, but he presses them open again,

spreading me wide as he laps at me. He stiffens his tongue and fucks me with it, his nose brushing against my clit, then laps at my pussy again, drinking up the arousal he draws out of me.

I haven't even gotten his shirt off yet. I keep trying to reach down and tug at it, but Hale is single-minded, almost animalistic in his determination.

"Hale," I pant, my hips shifting as I try to stave off my orgasm. "I need you too. Please."

I grasp at his shirt again, and finally, he gives me what I want. With one hand, he reaches up and tugs it off, only breaking away from me long enough to pull it over his head. He keeps his face buried in my pussy as he uses one hand to unzip his pants and shove them down, kicking them off his legs.

Only when he's fully naked does he pull away from me, going up on his knees between my legs and staring down at me, splayed out beneath him. He fists his cock, his blue eyes so dark they look almost black as his gaze tracks over me.

His nostrils flare, and he drapes himself over me again, settling his hips between my legs as he brings his face so close to mine that I can feel the warmth of his breath on my lips. "Put me inside you, Grace."

His words make my pulse race, and I slip my hand down between us, wrapping my fingers around his hard length and guiding him to my entrance.

As soon as the thick head of his cock is inside me, he drives his hips forward in one harsh movement, slamming home.

"Hale!"

His name is torn from me as all the breath leaves my lungs in a rush. I cling to his back and shoulders as he fucks me hard and deep, the entire bed shifting beneath us with each thrust. Sweat begins to slick our skin as our bodies find a rhythm together, but before the pleasure inside me can reach its peak, Hale rolls us, flipping our positions so he's on his back and I'm straddling him.

I don't hesitate. The need inside me is as insistent as whatever seems to be driving him. My hands come to rest on his chest, my fingernails digging little crescents into his skin as I rise up and then drop back down on his cock, using my thigh muscles to ride him hard.

"Fuck."

His hands clamp down on top of mine, pinning them to his chest.

His hips arch off the bed every time I sink down onto him, and our pelvises collide with bruising force.

Something unstoppable is building inside me, something nothing can prevent. My inner walls ripple around Hale as he rolls us again, spreading my legs wide to give himself better access to drive into me.

Sweat drips down the side of his face, and his lips pull back in something almost like a snarl as he fucks me into the bed. He watches my face with intense eyes, and the second my orgasm hits, he lets himself go too, thrusting into me with several short, sharp strokes as he empties himself inside me.

He collapses on top of me as his body shudders with release, and we stay like that for several long moments, each of us gulping in air as our skin sticks together. Finally, he pulls out of me and rolls us onto our sides. His cum spills down my leg, but he doesn't seem to care, and neither do I in this moment. His arms wrap around me, pulling me against his body until we're pressed flush together—as if he's not ready to let go of this closeness yet. Not ready to let even an inch of space come between us.

His voice is thick and hoarse when he speaks, muffled by my hair as he buries his face against my shoulder. "I wasn't ready to lose him. I just... wasn't ready."

Tears streak down my cheeks, and I suddenly wonder if I ever stopped crying. "I know."

He drags in a deep breath and pulls back a little, lifting a hand to brush a strand of hair off my cheek. There's something in Hale's eyes as he gazes at me, his face only a few inches from mine, that cracks my heart wide open.

It's *understanding*.

It's sorrow.

It's wisdom gained too late.

His lips press together as he rolls me onto my back, rising up on one elbow to look down at me. He shakes his head, his brown hair looking even darker now that it's damp with sweat.

"I'm sorry, Grace," he murmurs. "I'm so sorry. For everything."

He means it. I can hear how *much* he means it in the weight of the word "everything." There's so much between us to be sorry for. So many secrets, so many old wounds and betrayals. So many misunderstandings and resentments.

So much pain.

We could let all of that define us for the rest of our lives. We could carry it with us like Atlas carried the world.

But we don't have to.

I swallow, reaching up to brush away the tears that track down his face, a mirror of the ones on mine. "Me too."

ZAID

NONE of us have slept in days, but it hardly fucking matters.

Not trusting any of his father's captains enough to bring them in on this, Hale's main focus is finding the mole and destroying them, swiftly and without mercy. The burden has been put on the five of us to sort it out.

It's been four days since Damian was gunned down. The Boston deal is still a go, as far as we know, but we haven't informed the head of their syndicate about Damian's death. Hale worries that a shakeup like that will blow the whole deal out of the water, and he also wants to keep other upstart gangs from making advances on our turf, thinking they've got a shot now that the longtime leader of the Novaks is dead.

"I need a break. My eyes are burning," Grace says quietly, closing the file she's been paging through. "Leave that for me, I'll come back to it after I take a rest."

It's past eleven, and we're all gathered in the living room, going through a shitload of old records Hale dug up in his dad's office. Odds are low that we'll find anything useful in them, but it's worth checking. Maybe we'll pick up on something Damian missed.

She stands and stretches, working out the kinks in her neck.

Something about her has changed in the past few days. She's stayed up late and woken early, putting in the same long hours we all are as we search desperately for answers. I can see it in everything she does—a silent determination to help.

I can't help but remember my conversation with Lucas in the car that day, how we both wanted nothing more than for her to feel like she isn't a captive. I don't think she does anymore. After all, the person who ordered her to be kept under our watch is dead.

But she hasn't left.

She's stayed.

She's chosen us.

Hale gives a soft nod, watching her as she leaves the room and disappears into the dark hallway. He looks at the clock, then settles back in to work.

But twenty minutes later, he quietly closes up what he's doing and follows Grace into those same shadows.

If Grace can be Hale's salvation, then there's no place for the twist of jealousy I feel toward my friend. I shove it down, because without Grace, I have a feeling that Hale wouldn't be as calm and clear-headed as he is right now. Without Grace, we might have lost Hale for good.

The two of them share something that only they can understand, losing their dads in the exact same

way.

I'm glad they have each other.

As for the rest of us, we work through the night, no eating, no sleeping. No stopping until the mole is eliminated, and with every hour, I feel us getting closer and closer. Slowly but surely, we're uncovering a hidden, deadly trail that leads to months of secret work, backstabbing, and bribery.

THE FILES DON'T REVEAL shit.

We've gone through almost every piece of paper Hale can get his hands on, and he's had me and Lucas keep tabs on a couple of people, including Myles. But Damian's old second hasn't done anything suspicious, despite the fact that he's still obviously pissed about not being kept on in that position when Hale assumed control of the syndicate. He's gone to Calvin's for a drink a few times, but that in itself isn't incriminating enough to implicate him. Lots of people drink there—it's a fucking bar.

"But it's not *just* a bar," Lucas argues. We've spent the morning debating our next steps, guzzling coffee and eating a half-assed breakfast. He taps the old burner phone we recovered from Brian's body. "It's a bar we know our target frequented at some point."

"Yeah, but how useful is that?" I groan, scrubbing a hand down my face. "That narrows it down a little, but not a fuck of a lot."

"No." He shrugs. "Unless we can find out exactly when they were there. We need to know what they said to Brian. On that call or any others."

"Should we just perform a seance then?" I ask irritably. "Ask Brian to pretty please tell us what he knows?"

Lucas almost laughs. If the stakes weren't so fucking high, I'm sure he would've. But not a lot seems funny these days.

"We already had a hacker try to pull shit off the phone," Hale reminds him. "He couldn't get anything. It was wiped."

"So we try again."

"I might know a guy." Ciro speaks up, and we all stop talking and turn to him. He's quiet by nature, and especially in situations like this, he doesn't speak unless it's something worth saying. So we all pay attention when he does. "He's supposed to be one of the best. Should I call him?"

Hale hesitates for less than a second before he nods. "Do it."

He trusts Ciro with his life, just like we all do, but he also trusts his judgement. Ciro is his second now, and he's stepped up to the role like he was born for it.

Already tapping out the number on his phone, Ciro steps out of the kitchen to make the call. He returns a few minutes later and gives a nod. "Done. He'll be here in an hour."

Grace runs upstairs to shower, and I clean up the remnants of breakfast while we wait.

We all gather in the living room an hour later. The phone sits on the coffee table, an innocuous looking thing. It's almost hard to believe it could possibly hold the answers we're after, but Lucas is right. It's worth a fucking shot. We're out of other brilliant ideas, and we're running out of time.

When the hacker arrives, Ciro draws his gun and goes to let him in. It's not how we normally answer the fucking door, but we're all on-edge right now.

"What are we hoping to get from this thing?" Grace asks quietly. She's sitting on the couch

between me and Lucas, fingers drumming on her knees.

“Ideally, the hacker will be able to recover voicemails, texts, and phone calls,” I list off. “Also phone numbers, location data—for instance, where calls were placed and to whom. It’ll create a digital trail for us that could possibly lead to our mole.”

“You can find all of that from a flip phone?” She looks down at the little object skeptically.

“Hopefully,” Ciro says, walking in with a man I’ve never seen before. “If he’s as good at his job as he says he is.”

“I am.” The newcomer gives a lopsided grin, holding up one hand in a gesture of greeting. “Keith Medcalf.”

We all stand, instantly alert. Even though we invited the guy into our house, Lucas and I both take a small step in front of Grace without thinking, our stances ready.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Hale offers, stepping forward.

“Not a problem,” Keith says. “Your friend has briefed me on what you’re trying to get out of the phone. If there’s anything to find, I’ll find it for you.”

“Good.” Hale nods. “And you know the consequences if you mention any of this to anyone?”

“Absolutely.” Keith flashes a grin that doesn’t reach his sharp eyes. “I’m here for the paycheck, not the politics. And I’d like to fuckin’ live to see my next birthday.”

“Good, then let’s get started.” Hale grabs the phone from Lucas. “Do you need anything to begin?”

“Just what I have here.” He holds up a clear bag filled with a laptop and a few cords.

Upon entering our house, anything that guests want to carry with them go in a clear bag that we can monitor at all times. Additionally, if he was carrying any weapons, all potential weapons or garments that can conceal weapons would have to be removed. This guy knows we’re not messing around, and if he tries anything... well, he won’t get to have that birthday he was so excited about.

The minutes that follow seem to drag on until I think I might lose my damn mind. Usually we’re all pretty good at mastering our emotions when we need to, but that hasn’t been the case all week. All of us are anxious for any new information this phone could bring, and it takes all my willpower not to hover over Keith’s shoulder as he works.

He does his job quietly and efficiently, ignoring our agitation as he focuses on his work. Finally, he gives a grunt of satisfaction, straightening a little as he pulls up a document on his screen. “Does any of this look familiar to you?”

We scan over the list of dates, times, locations, and menial texts that look unimportant to anyone but the sender and receiver.

“Nothing that stands out,” Hale says slowly, reading over the list. There’s a bite of frustration in his tone. “Did you find anything else?”

“Yeah. As soon as this finishes syncing, you should have access to any deleted voicemails or audio recordings on the phone.”

Hale nods, returning to his seat without a word. I give a few more minute’s attention to the list, but don’t find anything of interest other than stuff we already know.

One short text catches my eye, and I duck my head a little closer to the screen as I read it. It’s a message from Brian to whoever he was working with.

Secured, heading to location now.

I grimace, my hands clenching into fists. That one was sent the night we rescued Grace from the fucker who used to be her fiancé.

“Ah. Here we are.” Keith nods in satisfaction, interlacing his fingers and stretching them out. His knee bounces up and down as he taps on the keyboard quickly, pulling up a list. “Any particular date

you'd like to start?"

"Start from the top. Oldest to newest," Hale directs, leaning forward in his seat.

Keith presses *play* on the first message, and the voice that comes from the laptop's speakers sends chills down my spine. The voice is instantly recognizable, even with the groggy transmission delays and the poor quality of the recovered voicemail.

Leland Bennett.

GRACE

I DON'T IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZE the voice that comes through the speaker from the recorded voicemail, but I'm the only one.

All the men stiffen, and my immediate reaction is to glance toward Hale and try to read his expression, the war of emotions raging in his body. Anger and betrayal flash across his face, followed closely by sadness.

"Who is it?" I murmur.

Zaid catches my eye and shakes his head, jerking his chin lightly toward Keith.

Right. They won't say the name in front of him. They won't take even that small chance that their hacker could let the man behind Damian's death know we're on to him.

"That's enough," Hale says gruffly. "Zaid, go grab a flash drive. We'll transfer everything to that, then listen through all of it."

Zaid nods and leaves, and there's a pause as everyone waits for Hale's next order. I watch as he fights to pull his shit back together and push aside everything he's feeling so that duty can take its place.

He recovers quickly. I'm not sure that's a good thing or a bad thing. He's soft with me, alone in my room or his at night—and although I know he has to be hard to survive this life, to lead the Novak Syndicate out of this dark time, I don't want him to lose his heart.

Whatever walls were still up between the two of us before, they all crumbled the night his father died.

The night he chose to trust me.

As if drawn by my thoughts, Hale's gaze shifts to mine. His dark blue irises warm slightly, and he draws in a breath as if calmed by my very presence.

"Thank you for your help," he tells the hacker, who nods. "We'll transfer the information you found, then you can go. You'll be paid shortly."

Zaid returns a moment later and hands Keith a small flash drive. The hacker plugs it into his laptop then taps out a few keystrokes. It takes less than a minute for everything to transfer, and he unplugs the drive and gives it to Hale. "Everything I got is on this."

Hale takes it, and Keith gathers up his equipment before Zaid and Lucas lead him out of the living room. My heart is beating hard and fast, and I can barely keep myself from demanding answers as we wait for the twins to return.

As soon as they step back into the living room, I glance around at the four men. "So? Who—"

"Leland Bennett."

Hale's words fall like a hammer, heavy and dark.

My eyes widen, my heart stuttering in shock. Leland Bennett. One of my father's old friends. One of Damian Novak's captains. One of the most trusted men in the syndicate.

"Are you sure?" I whisper, even though I already know the answer.

Of course they're sure. The look on each of their faces tells me that they aren't operating on a suspicion or a wild hunch anymore. I may not know Leland well enough to recognize him by voice, but these men do. They've known him for years.

"We need to listen to all of it," Ciro tells Hale, his voice low. "We need to find out as much as we can before we go after him. We need to know everything."

Hale nods, a rough jerk of his head. Lucas's laptop is sitting on one of the large chairs nearby, and he brings it over so Hale can plug the flash drive in. They start with the first message again, and now that I know what to listen for, I can pick out the cadence and tone that identifies this as Leland's voice.

There are only about ten voicemails, but it's more than enough. We listen to them one after the other, and as we do, several things become clear.

First, Leland was in league with Brian, coordinating with him the night Brian kidnapped me and tried to kill me.

Second, the two of them weren't working alone.

And third, Leland was plotting against Damian.

There's no mention of it in the voicemails since Brian died before the night of the drive-by, but it's clear that Leland must've helped set up the attack at The Blind Pour. He was probably the one who called in the shooters, alerting them to the fact that Damian was outside and in position.

He betrayed the syndicate.

Worse than even my father did.

"Goddammit," Hale mutters when the last recording ends. "*Goddammit*. The fucker was working with Brian. And he must've had other flunkies working for him too. He was at the bar the night of the shooting; he gave himself the perfect damn cover."

His voice is hoarse, and I can tell he's working hard not to fly off the handle. He looks like he's about to lose it, and I can't blame him.

Leland might as well have held the gun himself. He may not have fired the shot, but he called in the hit. He coordinated the whole thing.

"Fuck, that's why he was still in the bar." Lucas looks murderous. "You sent me to get him, remember? He was still inside because he wanted to make sure he didn't get hit in the crossfire."

The angry tension in the room pulses like a living thing. Hale's jaw clenches, then he looks over at Ciro. "Keep that flash drive close. We'll comb through the whole fucking thing later, but I think it's about time we get answers from the man himself."

Ciro nods, his expression serious. The two men were always close, but they've grown even closer since Damian's death. The quiet, tatted man has stepped fully into his role as Hale's second, and I have no doubt he'd step in front of a fucking bullet for Hale—and vice versa.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, Hale taps the screen and then puts the phone to his ear. We all wait in silent suspense as the phone dials softly, and a muffled voice on the other end picks up.

"Leland," Hale says, slipping into a perfectly normal tone of voice. "I need you at my house in half an hour."

The change in him is almost scary. It doesn't start and end with his voice—it takes over his entire body, like a costume. He's not the Hale from seconds ago, the Hale from a week ago, but the business-like, cold Hale I knew when they first took me.

It sends a chill down my spine, although I know it's necessary.

"Stanley and Frank are already on their way," he says. "Something's come up with the Boston deal that needs our attention, now."

I strain to hear what's being said on the other end. I can't pick up the exact words, but Leland doesn't even seem to question Hale, thank fuck. Hale chose a good lie. These kinds of impromptu meetings are frequent and common in their line of work. My father was called in often by Damian Novak at all hours, summoned along with the other captains to deal with some new issue or problem that popped up. That kind of dedication is what allows mafia organizations to run so smoothly. No one gets to call in sick.

The Boston deal has consumed the Novak Syndicate for months. Any threat to the deal going through would be cause for immediate alarm and would require all hands on deck. So Leland should have no reason at all to suspect that something might be going on—no reason to suspect that his cover has just been blown.

Hale listens for a second, then nods. "Good." He hangs up, his expression hardening. "We've got half an hour. I want everyone ready and armed."

"Right." Zaid runs a hand through his hair as we all stand and silently begin to exit the room. Lucas sticks close to me. With a hand on the small of my back, he starts to lead me toward the stairs.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, stopping in my tracks as a flash of panic floods me.

"Upstairs," he explains, gesturing for me to resume walking. "Where it's safe."

"No. Hale never said I had to be upstairs." I shake my head. "I'll be fine here."

Twisting away from Lucas, I turn to look back at Hale, wanting his permission but not needing it. Regardless of what he says, I am *going* to be here with all of them; this is just as much my business now as it is any of theirs. I was engaged to the man who owned the phone Leland was calling, and if there is any way possible that I can help these four men, even if it's with information that may not seem important to me, I want to do it.

Even if it's dangerous.

Even if they don't like it.

"Lucas is right." Hale grimaces, looking suddenly exhausted. He slides his hands into his pockets. "You don't want to get caught up in this mess, Grace. I hate that you're this deep in it already."

"No." My brows pull together as I step toward him, directly disobeying his order. Hale raises an eyebrow but doesn't say anything, so I barrel on. "I already am caught up in this, and not because of my father or Brian. I'm caught up in it because I care about you. I want to be with you. By your side, *helping* you. All of you. I'm part of this. And you can't change that now."

There's a bit of a challenge in my voice as I say the last words, and something almost like a smile tugs at Hale's lips.

"No, I don't think I can change it, can I?" Something warm and possessive passes through his expression, and he slides his hands from his pockets as he moves forward, closing the distance between us. "And maybe it makes me an asshole, but I don't want to. I've fought against this as long as I can, Grace. I hope you don't hate me for it one day, but I want you. I need you. If you'll stand by our side, that's exactly where I want you."

He palms the back of my head and presses his lips to mine, and his kiss feels like a dark promise.

My heart flutters in my chest as I grab two fistfuls of his shirt, dragging him a little closer as I inhale his spicy scent.

When we finally break apart, he drags his hand around to slide down my jaw, his thumb brushing my lips. "Thank you," he murmurs.

He steps back, and when he and Ciro fall into a quiet discussion of how to handle Leland's arrival, Zaid and Lucas come to stand beside me. Zaid's hand brushes mine, and when I turn to look at him, he surprises the fuck out of me by dipping his head and kissing me too.

I jolt in surprise, then recover quickly and kiss him back, loving the way his taste combines with Hale's on my tongue.

"You're good for him, kitten," he says quietly as we break apart, and Lucas murmurs an agreement. "You're good for all of us. I'm glad you're here."

My heart thumps in my chest at his words.

I am too. I hate the circumstances that brought us together, I hate that I've lost my father and don't even know who he was anymore.

But despite the danger and chaos of the world I've found myself living in, I'm glad I have these four men in my life.

Since we don't have long before Leland's arrival, the men move quickly to secure the house, making sure there's nowhere for him to go if he decides to run and stashing weapons they can use if things get hairy. Damian's old captain shouldn't have any idea we suspect him—the fact that it took us so long to track him down might work in our favor now. He's had plenty of time to get cocky and complacent.

The minutes that tick by before Leland's arrival feel like the longest of my life, and I'm practically crawling out of my skin by the time we hear a knock on the door.

Hale nods sharply to Ciro, Zaid, and Lucas, and they all arrange themselves in position in the living room. I stand to one side—the men might've agreed to let me be here for this, but there's no fucking way they'd let me be involved in actually trying to take Leland down or restrain him should that become necessary.

I hold my breath as we listen to Hale cross the large foyer and open the door.

"Leland," he says smoothly. "Good of you to come."

GRACE

AS THE FOOTSTEPS grow closer and closer, my heart roars inside of my ears.

I take a few calming breaths and plant my feet, ready to face whatever is coming. None of what I told Hale earlier was a lie. I've been part of the search for the mole since the beginning, and I'm going to be here until the end.

Leland doesn't respond to Hale's welcome, breaking away from Ciro and Zaid with little more than a gruff grunt from the back of his throat. Unlike the rest of the men, his suit is unkempt, like he just threw it on or didn't even change before rolling around in bed for a few hours.

"Where are Stanley and Frank?" he asks, glancing around.

"They're not here yet." Hale's voice isn't as well controlled as it was on the phone half an hour ago. He straightens his jacket and stands directly in front of the man who was once his father's trusted captain.

Leland's gaze flickers to Hale's unflinching one, then to Zaid and Lucas, who move to stand on either side of him, blocking the exits. He may be a mole, but that doesn't mean he isn't smart—his shoulders tense just slightly as he begins to realize that something is very wrong here. His expression remains totally relaxed, but his gaze darts around the room, checking for exits.

"Why did you do it, Leland?" Hale asks quietly. There's rage simmering in his tone, but there's something almost like a plea in it too. It's the same question Damian asked about my father. The question that can eat a person up inside.

Why?

Leland turns sharply toward Hale, his jaw clenching. He has to know by now that he's trapped, that Hale and the rest of us are on to him. He has to know it's over.

But still, that doesn't stop him from trying.

Leland makes a sharp move to the right, trying to duck between Zaid and Lucas. But they're faster. Grabbing him by the arms, they hold his body tightly between them, pinning his arms behind his back as he grunts and struggles. Hale strides toward the three of them, his lips pressed into a thin line.

One, two, three.

His fist meets Leland's face brutally, splitting the skin on his brow bone and on Hale's knuckles, splattering them both with blood in a way that reminds me eerily of the night Damian died. Leland grunts in pain, and when Hale pauses for a moment, the older man struggles harder against Zaid and Lucas.

"What the fuck are you doing?" He's breathing hard, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. "If Damian were alive to see this—"

“Finish that sentence, and I’ll fucking kill you where you stand,” Hale says coldly, cutting him off. “If that’s what you want, keep talking. If you want to have a chance at living through this, don’t mention my father’s name again.”

Leland pales a little, but he glares at Hale. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. I don’t know what you want.”

“Yes you do, you fucking traitor.” Hale jerks his chin toward the hallway. “Bring him downstairs.”

Ciro hands a key to Hale, then shifts to stand in front of me, shielding me with his body as the twins drag Leland down the hallway with Hale in the lead. He still usually avoids touching me, but as things have settled and solidified between me and Hale, I’ve sensed Hiro letting down his guard around me a little more.

“Do you want to stay up here?” he asks, gaze flickering down my body as if to assess whether I’m still okay. “It’s not gonna be pretty down there.”

I blink up at him, swallowing. I know he’s telling the truth. Whatever is about to happen downstairs is something no normal person would want to see. But what I’m beginning to understand is that I’m no longer a *normal* person. This has become my life, and these men can’t protect me from all of it, no matter how much they might want to.

They’re beautiful, dangerous, ruthless knights. All four of them have tried to protect me, to save me from the worst parts of the world.

But maybe I don’t need saving.

“I’ll come,” I say, keeping my voice steady and even.

“We need answers.” Hiro’s eyes narrow, the gray of his irises softening. “And Hale’s not going to stop until he gets them. You understand what that means.”

It’s not a question. It’s a statement. He knows I’m familiar enough with this world to understand what sometimes has to be done to enemies of the syndicate in dark, sound-proofed basements. He’s giving me one more chance to back away, one more chance to go back to the safety and the light.

But I’m not afraid of the darkness anymore.

“I’m ready,” I tell him, trying to slow my racing heart. I’m not trained for this kind of shit like they are, but I already know the importance of at least trying.

To my surprise, Hiro offers a hand, and I slip mine into his without hesitating. His is warm and solid, his palm rough against mine as he leads me down the hallway. We’re walking so close together that our clasped hands brush against the side of his thigh and my thigh. The smallest flicker of awareness rushes through me as he shows me to the dark steps, knowing that he holds my hand just as much for my sake as he does his own sake.

He’s drawing strength from me just as much as he’s giving it.

Hale may be the one who gives the order to go or stop, but Hiro is the one who’ll do the dirty work.

The torture.

The Hiro I know, the one I’m falling in love with, is disappearing further and further into this other version of himself. The one that’s nothing but blank emptiness and cold efficiency. But the sweet, gentle man I know is still in there somewhere—a small squeeze of his hand reassures me of that.

“This way,” he murmurs, showing me to a door.

We go down the stairs together. By the time we get down to the basement and Hiro leads me into a large, cement-walled room, the other men already have Leland Bennett tied to a chair in the middle of

the room.

I linger in the doorway for a second as *Ciro* steps farther into the room. My stomach churns, but I steel myself against any lingering squeamishness and walk forward, taking my place next to *Hale's* side. I feel his attention flicker toward me briefly before it's focused on *Leland* again.

Ciro doesn't wait.

He doesn't ease into it.

I thought *Hale's* punches were brutal, but that's nothing compared to the vicious strikes *Ciro* unleashes on the man in the chair. *Leland's* already split lip turns bruised and swollen. His left eye swells shut. But still, *Ciro* doesn't stop.

The only time the black-haired man even pauses is to let *Hale* question their prisoner, holding his punches back until he's determined that *Leland* still refuses to answer. Then a new round of blows rains down, making *Leland* groan.

It goes on for minutes, but *Damian's* old captain doesn't give up anything. Dripping in sweat that mingles with his blood, he grunts with each blow as *Ciro* continues but never gives an answer to any of the questions *Hale* asks.

Leland may be a traitor with a weakness against betrayal and bribery, but he's received the same training each of the other men have. He doesn't break easily. Whatever secret he's holding on to isn't going to come out even under an assault of fists. When *Ciro* begins to sense this, the punching suddenly stops.

Walking over to the other side of the room, he opens a cupboard I didn't notice before. It's only when *Ciro* grabs a knife from the rack of weapons and devices attached to the doors and shelves that I realize the display isn't just for show. My stomach tightens into a hard knot.

The next level of interrogation has started.

Battering someone with questions isn't going to break them down, not in the line of work these men are in. No, it comes down to pain and how much of it you can stand. *Ciro* survived months of torture at an enemy syndicate's hands, but he never broke.

He's the exception, though. Not the rule.

Ciro's torture is purposeful and deliberate, and when *Leland* screams with the first cut, *Zaid* curses under his breath, shifting to stand in front of me.

"No," I say, shaking. I feel like I might fucking hurl any second, but I'm not backing down now. I'm not fucking leaving. "No."

"Grace—" *Zaid* protests, trying once again to block my view. But *Hale* holds out a hand, stopping him.

"She said no," he growls. "It's her choice."

It *is* my choice, and I chose to be here. I didn't choose the censored version, the version that's easy to bear. I chose the truth.

And the truth is that *Leland's* punishment is nothing compared to the blood shed from *Damian*. His pain is nothing compared to what *Hale* felt as he watched his father die. And if it *is* just as bad? I don't care.

He brought this on himself when he betrayed the men I care about.

Leland holds out for a long time. Almost longer than my stomach can take. My palms are clammy, and my fingers shake as I clench my hands into fists. As the smell of blood becomes stronger and stronger in the air, I wonder how much longer I can hold on before I *do* vomit.

Luckily, I don't have to find out, because *Leland* finally gives up.

"I'll tell you!" he screams, his voice hoarse. "I'll tell you. Please. Please..."

Just like that, Ciro stops, glancing back over his shoulder at Hale. His face is completely blank, impassive—as if he’s turned off his emotions completely as he did the job that had to be done.

Hale nods, and Ciro straightens and steps back, still holding the bloody knife.

Not even bothering to side-step the dark red puddles that have gathered on the floor by the chair, Hale steps forward. The room must be scrubbed down by someone after every interrogation, because the room was pristine when we came in. Now it smells like sweat and blood, like fear and adrenaline, but Hale doesn’t even seem to notice. He braces his hands on his knees and lowers his face until his eyes are level with Leland’s.

“Who do you work with?” He speaks the words slowly, his voice hard.

“I work for you—”

Leland’s stupid words earn him another blow to the face. The blood dripping from his nose and mouth sprays in a wide arc, splattering the floor in thick droplets.

“Why did you betray my father? Why betray the syndicate?” Hale growls. “Who are you working with?”

“Brian and I were trying to get Grace,” Leland says, wincing against the pain. His breaths come in gulps as he grasps for words.

“Brian is dead,” Hale says, straightening his back. “And yet you continued to operate. You had help with the attack on my father. So who else are you working with?”

I keep my eyes trained on Leland, not shaken by whatever he has to say about Brian. By the way Zaid and Lucas shift, I can tell they’re concerned about the mention of my ex-fiancé. But it’s not new information that Brian was working with Leland—or that Brian was a dirty cop.

I’m done mourning anything I once had with that slime-ball. I’m done being hurt by his betrayal. I’ve found four men who are better than he could ever hope to be, even though once, I was convinced the opposite was true.

Before I had my eyes opened.

“We sent the dog to scare her,” Leland pants. “She ran from you once. We wanted her to run again. It was a warning. That’s all.”

“You’re still not answering the question,” Hale says. “You’re not working by yourself, Leland. I’m not stupid. Choose your words wisely.”

“I don’t actually work for her, you see.” A hint of panic creeps into Leland’s voice. His wounds are bleeding profusely, and his words are slurred. I don’t know if it’s because he’s on the edge of consciousness or because his mouth is too swollen for him to speak properly. “I didn’t want to help her. I didn’t want to get roped into her fucking plans. I tried not to give in, but she—”

“*Who?*” Hale demands. Ciro steps forward, grabbing Leland’s forearm and twisting.

I flinch at the sound of bone breaking. Leland gives a wail of pain as Hale leans down, saying something low in his ear that I can’t make out from where I’m standing.

“Camilla,” Leland finally says, face crumbling. “She wanted Damian dead. She had Brian go after Grace. She set all of this up.” He coughs, spitting out blood. His gaze flicks to me before returning to Hale. “It was Camilla Weston.”

My entire body jolts, shock making my heart thud heavily in my chest.

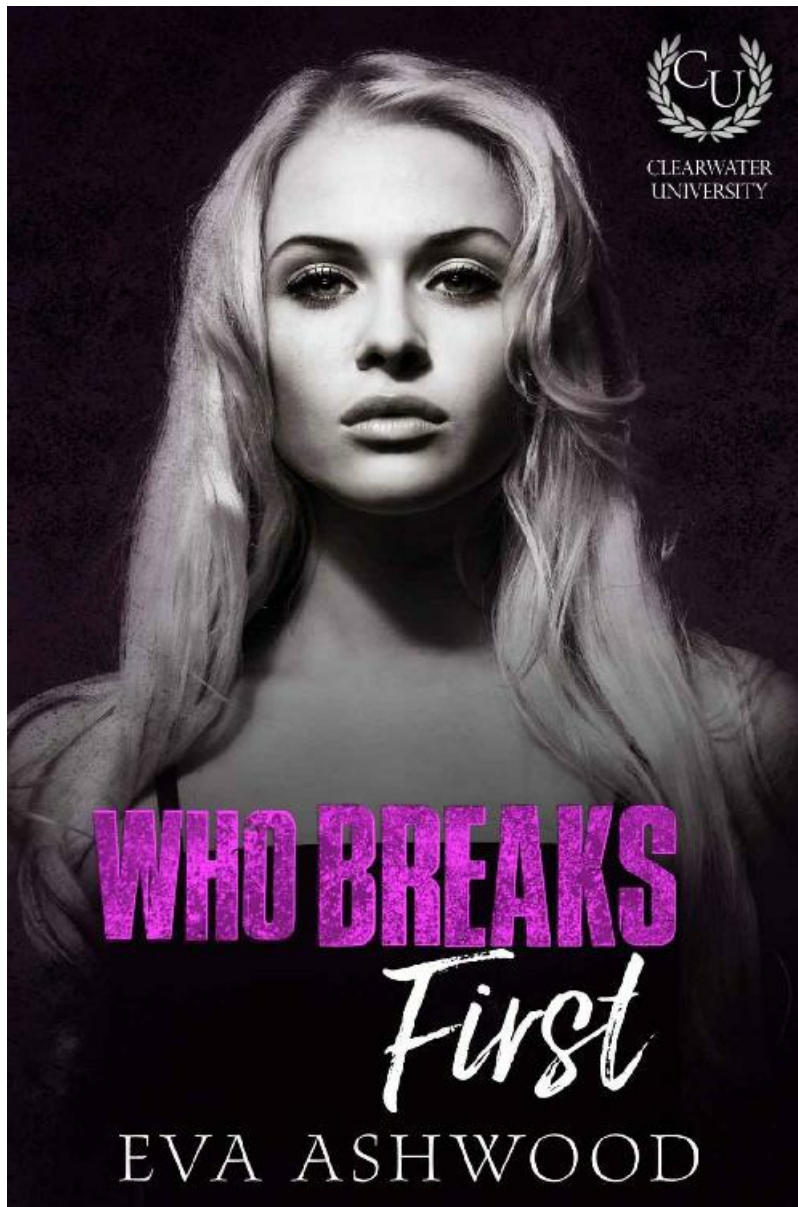
Mom.

To Be Continued...

The story will conclude in *Savage Queen*, the final book in the *Dark Elite* series! Find it on Amazon [HERE](#).

And if you're dying to talk about the book, come hang out in my Facebook group, [Eva Ashwood's Readers](#). I post giveaways, teasers, and updates there too!

Want something to read while you wait for *Savage Queen* to come out? Try my completed enemies-to-lovers reverse harem romance series, *Clearwater University*. It's got a fierce AF heroine, hot hate sex, and three alphas who'll steal your heart and melt your panties. ;) If you liked this book, I think you'll love that series! Turn the page to check out the cover and blurb.



**They were my bullies once.
Three boys I hated more than anything.**

They made my life hell for a year--until I escaped their cruelty when my dad's job moved us away.

I've never forgotten them though. Never forgotten what they did. And I know they haven't forgotten me.

But when I'm offered a full-ride scholarship to the prestigious Clearwater University, I refuse to let old fears stop me from accepting.

Because I'm not the girl I used to be.

I'm stronger. Tougher.

Angrier.

And if West, Reese, and Trent think they can fuck with me again... well.

We'll just see who breaks first.

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