

CURSED LOVERS DUET BOOK TWO

GRAVE

HOUSE

She was built to kill monsters.
This one came back to marry her.

USA Today & Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

AMO JONES

GRAVEHOUSE

CURSED LOVERS DUET

BOOK 2

AMO JONES



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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello, reader. Please take this as a serious warning heading into this book. As some might already know, I write dark romance, but if you're new here, you may be a little lost on what that may entail. Dark romance is a broad spectrum, so I want to break things down for you.

[Follow this link](#) to read the list of content that some may find triggering in this book. (Spoilers)

Love and darkness, Amo. Xo

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*This is for the ones who have never needed saving because they're the
fucking villain.*

And also fucking the villain.

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PROLOGUE

THUD.

His head rolled under the grand piano.

Le Boucher Sans Loi watched blood spread across the marble and gather around his boots before it ran on toward the dead man's severed hand.

The study had been arranged to announce power to anyone who got past the walnut doors. Shelves climbed two stories. Leather chairs faced the fireplace at careful angles. A crystal decanter waited beside two glasses, set out for the civilized conversation rich men preferred before arranging another person's death.

One chair had overturned during the struggle. The dead man's torso lay against it, shoulders wrenched back until it gave.

Le Boucher drew a cigar from inside his coat. His gloves left a dark smear across the wrapper. He inspected the damage, clipped the cap, and struck a match against the underside of the desk.

The flame caught, and smoke filled his mouth, bitter and warm, before he pushed it out through his nose. Beneath the tobacco sat the dense metal odor of fresh blood, opened bowels, and fear.

Death had a scent long before decay claimed it. Blood was a word that was easy to digest, but Blood was only the beginning.

No one would find this rot. He planned to leave it here until the ground took it back.

He lowered the match into one of the crystal glasses, killing the flame in the remaining whiskey.

The head beneath the piano faced the wall. Dark hair covered most of the cheek.

If he was being honest, Le Boucher didn't plan for the man to leave with his life, but he didn't expect to kill him so quickly either. Guess that was what he got for thinking Le Boucher was some hit man

His hand went to the back of his neck without permission. The muscle had knotted there, hard enough to ache. He rolled his shoulders once beneath his coat and took another pull from the cigar.

He looked toward the desk. One drawer stood open. A compact pistol lay half inside it, caught against a leather ledger. The dead man's fingers had missed the grip by less than an inch.

"That went well," Le Boucher murmured.

The dead were excellent confidants.

Crossing to the body meant stepping around the deepest blood. His soles peeled off the marble with each step. He crouched, setting the cigar across the rim of the clean glass. The dead man wore casual clothes, his collar open on a narrow strip of skin. No pulse there. Head under the piano aside.

Two fingers into the inside pocket found a wallet. Cards, cash, and a photograph folded twice.

He opened the photograph.

Three people huddled together, one a child. Le Boucher studied the child for one breath, then folded the picture along its old lines and returned it to the wallet.

Children deserved better.

He searched the outer pockets. Keys in the left. A small folding knife in the right. Two receipts, one from a private club and another from a jeweler. The jeweler's total carried enough zeroes to buy affection from anyone willing to rent it by the hour.

A dark rectangle pressed against the fabric near his right hip.

There.

He drew out the phone and wiped the bloody edge against the dead man's jacket before moving to the head and taking hold of the hair. The strands were damp between his gloves. He turned the face toward the ceiling.

The eyes were open.

One had filled with blood where a vessel had burst. The other stared past Le Boucher at the painted cherubs above the piano. The mouth hung open around a breath it never finished.

The neck had been cut cleanly. His weapon was made for that work, though human bone always demanded commitment. Anyone who claimed otherwise had only watched from a safe distance.

Le Boucher held the phone above the face.

The lock opened.

He lowered the head carefully. It rolled an inch before the cheek settled against the floor.

The phone showed a stack of notifications: missed calls, messages, a banking alert.

None carried the name he needed.

Back on his heels, he opened the messages. His thumb moved through conversations while the cigar burned behind him.

Most were useless.

Reason to believe failure. She has been infected. Nonna made sure of it.

Le Boucher opened that exchange.

Ah. So this is how we got to this point.

His jaw tightened. The cigar smoke no longer covered the odor rising from the rug. He stood and carried the phone to the desk, where the reading lamp threw a narrow pool of yellow across the ledger and pistol.

We will call in Le Boucher. He will handle it.

Arrogant bastard.

Killing him this early had made everything ahead harder. Le Boucher didn't care. He had patience, and in time she would come apart the way everyone comes apart.

Under his knife.

CHAPTER ONE

ASHER

ONE YEAR AGO

MY ODDS WERE shit from the start. Either my name or the slopes were gonna take me out eventually. But her?

Fuck.

I try to lift my head, but it weighs a thousand pounds, pulling at the muscles in my neck.

I manage to hold my chin up for a second before my strength fails and it hits my chest. Not that I want to look around this hellhole, since I'm certain I know where the fuck I am.

Everything is so white it burns, and since I'm already fucked up, I try to minimize the damage by shutting my eyes.

The smell is what I can't ignore. Death has a specific scent, especially when you do it right.

Venom.

No matter how much bleach you use to hide it, it's everywhere.

Leather cuffs bite into my wrists, and every few seconds the tendons in my arms pull, threatening to pop.

My body sways from chains bolted to the ceiling, the bitch keeping me strung up like fresh kill in a slaughterhouse.

Which...accurate.

Blood slips down my right side, a reminder of how I ended up here, and I wish I could tell her that the hole she shot through me isn't even on my

pain radar compared to the one she left in my fucking heart.

She left me there to bleed out. Cried. Said she was fucking sorry. *I trusted you.*

Laughter crawls out of me, but it dies faster than I do.

Unfortunately.

I tilt my head to hear better, but a sharp frequency pierces my ears while the air vents pulse overhead, coating my lungs in a sweet scent with every inhale.

Motherfucker. I know that scent, recognize the sugary toxin that takes weeks to leave your throat.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

A white dome catches my eye in the corner, hiding a state-of-the-art camera.

Yeah, bet they're fucking watching.

I grin at it, flashing my teeth.

Gonna have to start praying too if I get out of here.

A speaker crackles overhead. "I'm so glad you're still alive, Asher. Now, have you learned your lesson, or should we continue?"

Lessons are for children.

"Continue," I rasp, throat aching from however long I was out.

Blood drips to the floor while the speaker box gives me nothing.

"Are you compromised, Delacroix?" she finally asks, her voice as sweet as the gas pumping into the room.

I pause, the corner of my lip curling. "Nah. Just...dying."

I ain't mad about it. I should kill her just for saving me. She should have left me there to rot.

"Hmm," she mutters, and I can almost see her smug face. "Love would do that to you."

My jaw snaps closed. "Who said anything about love?"

I'm a fucking liar. She doesn't need to say it.

My wrists throb, fingers going numb, and I'd have taken death before waking here. *Fuck you, Venom. Couldn't even kill me properly.*

"I'd suggest you not lie to me, Crow," she says through the speaker.

I test the cuff, but there's no give. Whoever set this up either knows restraints or knows me.

Ivy has been my safe space for longer than I care to admit, yet when I picture her green eyes now, all I feel is pain.

I hate her for it.

I need her for it.

The woman's silence stretches until I want to claw through the speaker and drag her out by her throat.

"You're three levels underground, surrounded by steel-reinforced walls and twenty-four-hour surveillance. Your fans think you're recovering from a snowboarding accident." Her laugh cuts through the static. "You're not getting out, Asher. Not until I say so."

My vision blurs red.

This is the psychiatric facility where people disappear into paperwork, where rich families bury their embarrassments.

"Fuck you." The words scrape out of me, and I yank against the restraints until my shoulder screams, blood running faster down my side, hot and insistent. "Let me out."

"Or what?" She sounds amused. "You'll bleed on my floor? You're already doing that."

I pull harder, the chain rattling but holding as my feet slip in my own blood. I catch myself, gasping, the pain wiping my head blank for a second.

Ivy.

I need to find her, need to make her explain why she looked at me like that before she pulled the trigger, like I was already dead, like she'd mourned me months ago.

"Where is she?" I demand. My voice breaks halfway through and I don't care. "Where's Ivy?"

"There it is." Her satisfaction loud. "The desperation. You're rabid for her, aren't you? Even after she shot you. Even after she left you dying."

"Tell me where she is," I demand.

"No," she says.

I thrash against the cuffs, leather burning into my wrists while the chain shrieks and my vision tunnels. Everything hurts, everything narrowing down to the single thought that Ivy is out there and I'm locked in here.

"Let me OUT!" I roar, tearing my vocal cords.

Silence.

"This is pathetic," the woman says. "Look at you. Feral over a girl who put a bullet in you."

"She's mine." The words tear through all my restraint. I don't give a fuck anymore. "She's MINE."

“She’s nothing.” She spits each word. “And by the time I’m done with you, you won’t want her anymore.”

I laugh, blood bubbling at the corner of my mouth as I lick it away.

My eyes drag up the wall, landing on the camera like I could see right through her.

“You don’t know me.”

“I know exactly what you are, Delacroix. You’re a rabid dog who thinks he’s a wolf. But rabid dogs get put down.” Her voice drops lower. “Or they get rehabilitated. Broken down. Remade into something useful.”

My arms burn and my side screams, my heartbeat thumping in the wound, each pulse pushing more blood out.

But all I can see is Ivy’s face, her shaking hands as she held me, the tears that fell even though she tried to stop them.

“You can drug me.” My words slur, but I force them out. “You can break me. But you won’t make me forget her.”

“We’ll see,” she says.

The speaker clicks off.

My eyes snap open to find her standing three feet away, close enough that I see the satisfaction curling her mouth. Black suit, black heels, black soul, everything about her screaming money and control.

“You smell like a funeral,” I rasp, each word dragging over what’s left of my throat. “Knew you couldn’t handle me without turning me into a zombie first?”

She doesn’t flinch, studying me like I’m a toy. “Still so much fight left. Impressive.”

“Let me down.” I smirk, jerking against the chains. “See how impressive I am.”

“Such violence.” She circles me slowly, heels clicking against concrete. “All for her.”

My jaw locks. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” She bats her eyes. “Speak the truth?”

She stops directly in front of me, close enough that her breath ghosts across my face. “She chose this, Asher. Chose to leave you dead. Chose to...”

My voice drops low, my eyes locked on hers. “I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Asher Delacroix,” the woman continues, voice never wavering. “Your father would be disappointed. You didn’t love her. She’s poison and you’re

nothing more than the sickness.”

“She’s mine,” I growl.

“No.” She leans closer, her perfume choking me. “She’s gone. And you’re here. Alone. Broken. Exactly how we all knew she’d leave you.” Her eyes widen on me. “Do you believe us now? That she’s too far gone?”

Fucking bitch.

I roll the saliva in my mouth and spit in her face.

She blinks, her tongue swiping it off her lip. “Delicious. You know how much I adore you.”

I pull again, putting every ounce of weight into the movement until my shoulder vibrates with a wet pop.

Every bone screams in pain, but I give her nothing. Nothing but the snarl on my lips.

She tilts her head, unbothered. “Fascinating,” she murmurs, stepping closer. “All this power, ruined by a girl who never wanted saving.”

“By the time I’m done with you, Asher Delacroix, you’re not only going to hate Ivanya Dubois, but you’re going to want to kill her.”

I tug on the chains again.

She continues. “And you will. Right after you humiliate her by marrying my daughter.”

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CHAPTER TWO

IVY

PRESENT

TWELVE FUCKING MONTHS OF THERAPY. Of being haunted by the memory of every way he'd pull me down and fuck me to sleep. *Three hundred and ninety-three days* of chasing the ghost of him only to wake with the same hollow burn spreading through my chest.

"Ash—"

He takes my hand and tugs me forward. "Aw, don't look so shocked to see me, Venom."

I stumble up the final steps, or he drags me up them, and clear my throat. *Compose yourself, Ivanya.*

His chest brushes my chin as he kisses the top of my head. "What's the matter?"

Blue eyes search mine, that mouth I've obsessed over curling into a cruel smirk.

"What is happening?" There's no point masking, since only my people are here.

He barely steps back, just enough for the celebrant...

I pause.

Wait... that's not who we use for weddings.

The celebrant's voice fills the room. I fix my gaze on the solid wall of his chest. If I look at my family, I'll see their faces and lose it. If I look up into the eyes of the only man I've ever loved, I'll come apart.

So I don't. I think back to when I took this job, trying to find a crack, a flaw. But every job is flawed. The script never makes sense.

He braids his fingers with mine and my heart trips over itself. Damn it. I didn't want—Using his forefinger and thumb, he directs my eyes up to his.

Words fail me. His thumb presses against my bottom lip, a gentle swipe that could be a threat or a promise.

"Do you, Asher Thane, take Ivanya Celeste Dubois as your wife?"

Blood drains from my face, the hairs on the back of my neck prickling.

He's used my legal name. My real fucking name, which means...

My eyes land on the table in the corner, where the marriage licenses are. *They're fucking real.*

Oh God. How are they real?

Focus.

I angle into him until his chest brushes my breasts. From the outside, we look like any other couple.

From here? *Rage.*

"You used my real fucking name?" I say around clenched teeth and a fake smile.

His fingers twist into the back of my hair, holding me in place. "Why not?"

I try to step back—nope, this is too close—but his grip tightens, snapping my attention back to him.

"What's the matter, Venom?" his brows dip in mock concern. "Don't wanna *play* with me anymore?"

His words fracture any chance I had of blocking him out.

"You were never a game to me, Ash." Grief chokes my words as they leave.

I drag a breath in, finally tearing my eyes off him to look past his shoulder. Luce stands near the front in a black dress, her hazel eyes fixed on me, mouth calm, hands locked so tight I see the strain from here. Jord wears that easy grin pinned on for show, his shoulders sitting too high. Leon doesn't move at all, steady on the outside, one second from ripping this room apart.

"Do you?" The Celebrant's voice pulls me back to the present.

Like I have a choice.

Asher's eyes drop to the crushed flowers in my grip, petals and snapped stems scattered across the ground.

I'm missing something. This Asher isn't the one I left a bullet in. I watched the bullet penetrate, watched him die, then let that regret kill me for a year.

His shadow devours me all at once.

I guess I'm going to have to play. "I do."

Asher takes my hand, fingers closing around mine hard enough to pin me in place. The world narrows to the space between us, his jaw locked, and eyes cold. My stomach knots into itself. The man I knew is gone, replaced by a brutal stillness of hatred.

He slides the ring over my finger.

Gold catches the light, curving elegant around a ridiculously oversized diamond. Then I see what encases it, and the air leaves my lungs.

A bullet. I don't have to guess where he got it.

Blue eyes sharpen on me, watching as my attention shifts between him and the ring.

His eyes drag over me a second longer, then he turns back to the celebrant. "Continue."

I answer every vow, making promises I never intended to keep. Everything moves too fast before I'm signing the dotted line.

His hand locks around mine and my heart stutters when his fingers slide between mine. Because I'm stupid.

He drags me back down the aisle, tossing a dark smirk at Leon as we pass.

Luce widens her eyes at me. She steps forward, mouth open, but I shake my head. *Not now. I'm fine. I won't die.*

A black car idles at the curb, and he reaches for the back door, gesturing for me to get inside.

Gathering the train of my dress, I slide into the dark enclosure, eyes never leaving Asher.

He slams the door in my face.

As soon as he's beside me, the car pulls out onto the cobblestone road.

Every breath hurts more than the last.

What do you say to the man you thought you killed? Nothing. Nothing I say will ever be enough.

He ignores me, watching the town pass. From this angle, I see the new scar on his throat better. My fingers curl in my lap to stop myself from reaching over to touch it, from feeling the bump on my thigh.

Inch by inch, the handle of the blade slides into my hand, and I don't wait.

I twist, elbow driving into his throat as my other hand flicks the blade open and I aim for his throat. Not to kill him, I won't go through another year of regret, but to...

He catches my wrist mid-swing and the knife falls to the floor. With that grip, he pulls me in closer, licks his bottom lip, the corner twisting into a smirk. "You miss me that much, Venom?"

All smugness vanishes before he grabs a fistful of my hair, forces me down onto my back.

The weight of his body holds me in place, his knee slipping between my thighs and forcing them apart.

A knot twists behind my sternum, tugging in two directions at once. Having him on top of me doesn't help. A year ago I traced that jaw with my tongue. Tonight, I just want to break it.

Before I do something real stupid like kiss him, I lift my chin. "Get off me."

His head tilts, his lips grazing my cheek. "Wanna make me?"

I go to swing one last time, but he whacks me away. He's fast, too fucking fast for a pretty rich boy that plays in the snow.

"Stop fucking around." He bares his teeth, and it's more feral animal than pretty boy with fame. "You killed me once. Twice isn't necessary."

Air floods my lungs as he lifts off me, grabs my waist, and shoves me against my chair. My head cracks the window, and his eyes snap to the spot. For a moment, all the anger drains from his face, but it's gone as fast as it came.

I glare at him. "Speaking of, how are you alive when I did *kill* you?"

He turns forward, unbuttoning his cuffs. "Clearly, you didn't." His eyes slide to me. "I suggest you find a new line of work. You're not very good at this one."

Actually, I'm very fucking good. Just not when it's you.

Seconds pass with neither of us wanting to break eye contact.

My heart slows.

I missed you.

"Are you going to tell me why I'm here?" I ask the first thing I can think of that won't end with me in his lap, begging for forgiveness.

“That’ll make things far too easy for you.” His head tilts to the side. “Don’t you remember? I’d much rather you crawl.”

My mouth snaps shut and I turn away from him. No point pulling answers from him now. Not worth the risk of making a fool of myself. First, I need to process this, compartmentalize it, and then... *and then what?*

My finger drums against my thigh.

The car rolls to a stop at a traffic light.

My scalp prickles, and I scan the street. Convenience store, park, people everywhere.

Sweat slips between my breasts as I think over my options.

My phone is tucked away, but my only weapon lies at our feet. By the time this corset lets me bend to grab it, Asher will have me in a headlock.

Such a wholesome marriage already.

Maybe he’s distracted enough to miss it.

My eyes drift to him, and find him already focused on me.

Dark lashes fan over sharpened cheekbones, his features brutal against that perfect mouth.

And now I’m staring at his mouth.

“Go on.” He widens his legs and settles deeper into his chair. “Do it.”

“Do what?” I ask, feigning innocence. Only that never works with Asher. He reads between the lines and doesn’t care if he has to reach inside my chest and pull them out himself.

“Sinead!” he shouts, though his gaze never leaves mine. “Pull over.”

My pulse rattles through me, every second stretching into a lifetime.

He shifts his weight forward, resting it on his thighs.

“Well, go on then, Venom.” Sunlight catches the twitch of his lip. “Run.”

I could run. I want to. *I’m definitely considering it...*

His eyes darken. “I dare you.”

I sigh and lean back. There’s no point. He’d only chase me, or worse, allow me to think I’m free. There’s no running away from this, even if I was a runner. Which I’m not.

He nods at the driver through the rearview mirror, and the car once again pulls out onto the road.

“Are you going to answer any of my questions?” I’m stuck here. I may as well make it painful for him too.

He ignores me.

Perfect.

He flicks a wrist toward my vibrating phone, his other hand dragging down his face. “Might wanna get that. Your friends seem stressed.”

I scan every line of this man’s face like I carved them there myself. I know him like I do the Codex. *I loved him*. More than a human could love anyone, but I still shot him. I still watched him bleed out on the floor out of the sake of orders. I chose my loyalties in a split second, then s[ent a year regretting it.

I open the group chat.

Punk: I’m working on this. I have no idea what’s happened.

Has anyone heard from Nonna yet?

Jord: No, I think she’s on a job.

She was. I knew because she gave me this job midway through hers.

Anything, Punk?

Punk: There’s something I forgot to mention. When I began the process of clearing us out of databases connected to Parker, Asher, Camille, and his fuckass brother Atlas, I hit a bump.

Leon: Oh, she’s gonna love this...

What kind of bump?

Three dots appear and my gut twists. Punk doesn’t make mistakes. She’s a coding goddess, trained from the moment she hit Nonna’s doorstep to be exactly what we need. Other organizations would kill for someone half as good. She’s never dropped the ball, not once.

Punk: His fanbase. I can only keep things out of the media, away from prying eyes, but people still talk. Raking through hundreds of thousands of comments every day when they’d post on his page, asking where he was. It was taxing, but I managed to get it under control by creating an automated system that bypassed the likes of even Meta.

I wait for the reveal, painfully aware of who sits beside me.

Punk: It's just, computers are great, but if they're not overlooked constantly, things can slip through. Camille was easy enough, since she sincerely thought he had just disappeared on her. Mixed with the passive-aggressive quotes she'd drop every now and then, I didn't have to do much on her account, but Atlas?

What? He stir the pot? Accuse us of killing him? What?

Punk: No. He fed into the story I planted, asking people to give his brother privacy right now as he lives off a bad breakup. I let his videos through every news agent because they helped us, right? But there was something.

Why the fuck would Atlas play along with Punk's narrative.

Punk: His eyes would go dark at the end of every sentence while he looked directly into the camera, like he was looking right at me when he'd answer.

Punk: Like he was mocking me. Us.

Punk: I always blew it off as me being a little more paranoid than usual because it was the first time we'd broadened the scope so far out to four people, instead of just the one and maybe a stray parent or sibling. I'm sorry. I should have said something.

Punk: I'm sorry. I should have said something.

My world tilts as I type out a final text.

It's not your fault.

Clearly, it's mine, for underestimating them both.

The drive stretches, silence thick between us.

Twenty minutes later, we pull through a high-wire fence and onto a tarmac where his familiar black jet waits.

I open my mouth to ask if I can get changed out of this ridiculous dress, but he's already out the door.

My side opens and I turn to see a set of honey brown eyes.

"Hello, I'm Sinead—" They nod their head over their shoulder. "His assistant... of all things."

"Are you new?" I ask, because I've never met them before.

Their eyes dart sideways. “Not new, no, but to you I guess I am. Come on.” They take my hand and I let them, shifting my dress to step out into the wind.

Sinead starts directing me across the tarmac. “Your bags are in there already with clothes already packed. Asher won’t be too much longer.”

I step through the space, memories flick through my head of the last time I was in here, when he came with me to Veilarath to sign the papers of the manor. It feels like a lifetime ago. Veilarath feels like a lifetime ago. I check in with Jasper now and then; he lives in the guest house, maintaining the property, but other than last winter... I’d never been back.

My hand grazes the top of the chair as the lighting dims. The cockpit door is open, and an attendant is shuffling glasses and food around on a table.

She spots me. “Oh, Ivanya! Take a seat and I’ll bring you a drink. You still like it neat?”

I smile at her. “Yes, thank you.” Gathering the dress, I find my bag sitting on a chair and swipe it up just as I hear footsteps on the stairs.

I freeze. I feel him before I see him. I always will. In every room, every lifetime, I’d feel him near.

He leans against the wall, crossing his arms and tilting his head. “Such a shame, Venom. Would have loved to fuck you in that dress.”

My mouth snaps closed as I quicken my steps down the narrow aisle and to the door of the bathroom.

As soon as I’m shut inside with gold fixtures and marble surrounding me, I press my back against the door, eyes closed, lungs burning with every breath.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Twisting my arm to my back, I find the buttons and ties and tug at them aimlessly to tug them off.

Luce knotted me up real tight, probably because she was too busy yapping about her latest adventure to notice.

The first clip doesn’t budge.

I twist my arm further, shoulder screaming in protest, but I can’t get them off.

“Come on.” I yank at the fabric. “Come the fuck on.”

The second clip catches on something. Lace, maybe. Or my own desperation.

I yank and hear a small rip, but the dress stays locked in place, something I stepped into willingly and now can't escape.

My reflection catches in the mirror, but I force myself to look away, unable to acknowledge this situation.

I try again. Both hands this time, contorting my spine in ways that would make Leon proud.

Sweat beads at my hairline. The makeup Luce spent an hour perfecting starts to slide. I don't care. I just need this dress off. I need to feel like myself again, whoever that is.

The third attempt leaves my arms shaking and my patience shredded.

I lean my forehead against the cool marble and count to ten, then twenty. The jet's engines hum beneath my feet, a vibration that travels up into my bones.

We're moving. Taking off. Going somewhere I wasn't told about with a man I don't recognize wearing the face of someone I loved.

The clips dig into my spine when I straighten.

I could ask him. On any other day, I would have. I would have walked out there and turned my back to him without a second thought. His fingers knew every inch of me. Every clasp and zipper and hidden hook.

But that was a different Asher. A different me.

This version of us doesn't get to touch each other like that anymore.

My hand finds the door handle. I crack it open, just enough to see the main cabin. He's sprawled in one of the leather seats, jacket discarded, sleeves rolled to his elbows. The attendant hands him a glass of something amber. He doesn't look up.

Sinead passes by with a tablet, their attention fixed on the screen.

"Sinead," I whisper-yell, hoping they hear.

They stop and turn, those hazel eyes on me through the gap in the door.

"Yeah?" Their brows jump in surprise.

"Can you..." I hate this. I hate every syllable of it. "I need help. With the dress."

Without hesitation, they nod. "Give me a sec."

The door closes as I wait.

Moments later, there's a soft knock before Sinead slips inside, the space suddenly too small for two people. They're taller than me. Most people are. But they move carefully, aware of tight spaces and tighter situations.

"Turn around."

My hands grip the corner of the counter as I turn my back to them.

Their fingers find the first clip. "I wish I could tell you that this is going to get better, but from what I hear, you can usually sniff out a lie better than most."

The second clip releases. Air hits my spine.

"I guess."

"Ivy?" They tilt their head slightly.

I pivot into them. Tattoos decorate their skin, peeking up beneath their collar. Sharp features, soft lips. They're attractive, and I wonder how they found the job they're doing.

"Yeah?" I ask, sounding more confident than I feel.

They smile, but it doesn't reach their eyes. "Hang in there."

Sinead slips out, and I'm alone in the cubicle, my dress pooled at my feet.

I never wanted marriage. I never wanted love. Love was disposable and fragile, something that bent until it broke. But I always imagined my real wedding would be different, even if I couldn't see myself marrying. I knew deep down that if that day came, where Ivanya Dubois was scribbled across a marriage certificate, the man would have to be an unstoppable force. Someone vicious enough to rip through every wall I spent years building, but gentle enough to touch the rawest parts of my fucked-up soul.

I guess in one way, that's Asher. But in so many ways... it's not.

I slip out of the door and find my seat, a row behind Asher and Sinead. I wish Atlas was here to break the ice.

Flipping open my phone, I swipe through the notifications and land on Instagram. I hesitate, my thumb hovering over his face. I never unfollowed him. I could never bring myself to.

Did he unfollow me?

The pettiness of even thinking that makes me want to check myself into emotional contamination rehab. I swipe back out of the app and reach into my bag to find my earpods.

Putting one in each ear, I tap on Spotify and shuffle on a playlist, resting my head against the window.

Asher is alive.

Any chance of me being remotely happy about this is squashed by the obvious. I fucking shot him.

My eyes land on him and my stomach drops, because he's already looking. Seconds stretch and my chest pulls tighter with each one, a slow building pressure, but neither of us looks away.

Finally, I rip my eyes away from him and skip the song.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into.

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CHAPTER THREE

ASHER

I HAD two options when I got out of Dovecrest, but only one ever stuck. Ivanya Dubois would fucking pay. All I had to do was not feel her.

We landed an hour ago, and I made it my mission to put as much distance between us as humanly possible.

Snow crunches under my board. I shift my weight, scrolling through photos I should have deleted months ago.

Ivy on the chairlift, hood pulled low. Ivy at the bonfire, firelight turning her skin gold while she pretended not to watch me. Ivy in my bed, hair fanned across the pillow, lips swollen, looking at me the way only I got to see.

I stop on that one, zooming in on her face. Fuck that. This is gonna fuck me right up, so I swipe to the next photo.

Us on Mount Crow, me slightly behind her, both our feet clipped into our boards. I don't remember who took it. Punk, maybe. Or Luce.

Swipe.

Wearing my jacket, she frowns up at the camera. She looked cute as fuck, even if she didn't listen to me when I told her to bring a coat. I was mid-interview with a broadcaster, hearing her teeth chatter beside me. I stripped it off without thinking, wrapping it around her shoulders. Like she was already mine.

She was.

She is.

Because till death do us part.

The ring on my finger catches the early morning light. Platinum, simple, an almost match to the one I forced onto her hand while she stared at me like I was a ghost. I may as well be. Fucking crawled all the way back from the grave she buried me in, and now we're not just gonna play house. We're gonna fucking burn it all the way down.

I groan, dragging a hand down my face. Simpler times.

I scroll back to the first photo. The chairlift. Ivy's smile, small and reluctant, annoyed at herself for giving me even that much. I said something stupid about her being too short to reach the safety bar. She elbowed me in the ribs, called me an asshole, and I felt more alive in that single moment than I had in years.

Now I feel nothing.

That's a lie.

I feel everything. That's the problem. Dovecrest tried to burn it out of me. Months of drugs and darkness, Aléia's voice telling me Ivy left me to die, that Ivy never cared, that I should hate her. Hate everything she worships.

I do hate her.

I also can't stop staring at her face on this screen, memorizing the exact shade of green in her eyes, the exact curve of her jaw. My phone buzzes, a text from Atlas sliding down the screen.

Don't worry. I'll keep her occupied ;)

He'll do no such thing and he fucking knows it.
Another buzz.

Damn. For sure thought that would have sent you flying back down the mountain.

I take one last look at the photo. Her eyes, her mouth, the ghost of a smile I'll never see again.

Then I delete the album.

Every photo, every memory, every piece of evidence that I was ever stupid enough to think she could love me back.

My thumb hovers over the confirmation.

Delete 1047 photos?

The wind kicks up, throwing ice crystals against my face. A dog barks in the distance. Normal sounds, a normal morning, but nothing about this is

normal. As soon as we landed, I ran for my board like a fucking coward.

I hit cancel and pocket the phone.

Pushing off down the hill, my board cuts through powder. Speed builds as wind tears at my jacket. The tree line blurs into streaks of black and white, and for three seconds, maybe four, there's nothing but gravity, the board beneath my feet, and the cold air shredding my lungs.

Snow sprays in a white plume as I kill the momentum, sliding to a stop twenty feet from the bottom.

Movement inside catches my eye.

There.

Ivy.

In my house.

She moves past the island, one hand trailing along the cement countertop. Her hair's down, falling in dark waves past her shoulders. She must have showered and changed. Jeans sit low on her hips, and that fucking top, black and tight, rides further up when she reaches for something on the top shelf. The fabric lifts, exposing the clear curve of her tits.

Heat slams through me, igniting from watching her move through my space like she has every right to be here.

She doesn't.

Her hips sway as she crosses to the fridge, that same fluid grace she's always had.

I grip the edge of the shed.

Wood bites into my palm, grounding me before I do something stupid. Like kick in the back door. Like pin her against the nearest wall and make her explain why she's such a fucking disappointment, why she still looks at me like she does, why my body doesn't give a fuck about the scar on my rib and throat or the year I lost to Dovecrest.

She opens the fridge, leaning in until denim stretches tight across her ass.

I look away.

This is the problem. It's always been the problem. Ivanya Dubois, or rather, Delacroix, walks into a room and my brain shuts down. Logic dies, strategy crumbles, and all that's left is *want*.

Guess I forgot about that little detail when I came up with the brilliant idea of marrying her.

She straightens, bumps the fridge shut, and turns.

For half a second, I think she sees me. Her gaze sweeps toward the window, going perfectly still. *Ditto.*

Snow clings to my hair by the time I hit the back door. I kick off my boots, peel out of my jacket, and toss it onto the first step in the foyer.

She walks in from the kitchen with a glass of water, freezing with the rim an inch from her mouth.

Her cheeks flush. "Atlas showed me my room."

Is that fucking embarrassment? A first for her.

I keep my expression dead, moving past her toward the living room and the large windows looking over the powder I just carved to pieces.

My shoulder brushes hers.

Her hand snaps out, landing on my forearm before I pass her.

I don't turn. I stare at the glass and the world beyond it, the faint reflection of us standing way too close.

"If it's any consolation," she says, lowering her voice and dropping her hand. Thank fuck. "I'm glad you're alive. Despite all of this..."

I turn, eyes narrowing. Is she fucking for real?

She backs up without a thought, a step, then another, until her shoulder blades hit the wall by the staircase. I keep closing in until her anxiety spikes the air between us, her fucking pupils blown wide.

"Consolation?" My lip twitches.

For the first time, I catch it. A flicker of *Fear*. It knocks the rage clean out of my chest.

I study her face, taking in the scar near her hairline I traced the night she fell asleep in my arms, and the swell of her lips I've felt against every inch of my skin. It's the proof that whatever this sickness is, it's gonna keep dragging us back together, no matter how much blood spills.

I lean in close enough that my words ghost over her skin.

Torture is patience.

"Look at me, Venom."

Her eyes travel up my face.

"Glad I'm alive?" My mouth twists.

She swallows. "I meant it."

"No. Your guilt needs it. You don't get to lick my wounds." I lean in closer. "No matter how good you are with that tongue."

I can't tell if she's offended, shocked, or turned on. Knowing her, probably all of the above.

"I know, I'm—" She blinks.

"You're what?" I lean back slightly, enough for her to question the exact level of fucks I give.

"Sorry," she admits softly, and her shoulders loosen.

My lips pull into a full-toothed smile that doesn't touch my eyes. "I don't want your fucking apologies, Ivy."

Her jaw tightens. This is the part where she always has to practice her self control.

I drag my gaze down every feature. "I'll never need you for anything ever again."

She lifts her hands. "Then what am I here for, Asher."

I shrug, because what the fuck did she expect? "Haven't thought that far ahead yet. Kinda went off plan..."

I'm teasing, but she doesn't need to know that.

Panic flashes over her face, enough to pull a laugh right from my throat. Ah, now this in itself is satisfaction. Those control issues...

My hand slides down the wall, caging her in. "What's the matter, Venom? Thought we had this chat about you and your obsessive need for control."

When I step back a little, she releases a small exhale of relief.

Fuck it. I *need* to hurt her.

Pulling out my phone, I keep my eyes dead on her as I find the contact I'm looking for. It rings three times before clicking over.

"Camille? What are you doing right now?"

Amazing that I could form the words from under all the vomit that's rising in my throat from merely saying her name.

Camille giggles. "Well, I'm packing my bags..."

My tongue swipes at my bottom lip.

Ivy's eyes snap to the movement before lifting back onto mine.

"Yeah?" My smirk deepens. "Good. Because I'm gonna need you to come ride my dick."

Ivy recoils like I slapped her, cheeks red and brows pulled in. She shoves at my chest and I laugh, stumbling backwards as she walks away.

"That hurt, Venom?" I say lazily, watching her retreat with a smirk. "Fucking good. Get used to it."

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CHAPTER FOUR

IVY

IT'S OFFICIAL. I hate Asher. *Come ride my dick.*

I seal myself inside this glass cage I'll call mine until Asher decides I'm more useful dead than stroking his need for revenge.

My fingertips drag over the floor-to-ceiling glass, keeping me from a thousand-foot drop. A California King bed floats above nothing, pressed against the far wall. The ocean stretches below it, meeting the sky at some impossible point.

"Jesus," I gasp, shaking my head. It's beautiful. I have no clue how they built it.

I turn away and stop dead. Another wall made of glass, only this one is in front of a large mountain with snowy slopes that spill into the valley below it. The general aesthetic of this room is all clean lines and dark furniture.

Black concrete and steel fixtures decorate the kitchen near the corner, and what I'm guessing is the bathroom is tucked behind a floating wall.

Flicking the light on in the closet, I freeze. A spiral staircase curls through the center.

"What the fuck kind of closet needs stairs?" I wrap my fingers around the metal railing and test its weight.

"Admiring your cage?" His voice scrapes from the doorway, and my shoulders lock. Clearly, he isn't done fighting.

I turn just enough to watch him. "You mean bedroom."

His proximity has the hairs on the back of my neck lifting, so I put the bed between us like it's some kind of armor.

"It can be whatever I want it to be." He pushes off the frame. "Until you prove you can behave."

My fingers curl into the Egyptian cotton. "While we're on this subject, where exactly do *you* sleep?"

His mouth curves and sadness weighs me down. The smirk of a boy I once knew...

"Worried about me, Venom?" He takes another slow step forward, tilting his head. "Worried you'll wake up with my hands around your throat?"

I keep my feet planted and loosen my grip. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Our history blurs between us until he finally breaks the tension by clicking his tongue.

He tugs the hood of his jersey over his head. "Good to know your smart mouth wasn't fake."

My mouth snaps closed.

Just as he reaches the door, he pauses. "Oh, and don't worry. Your little friends know where you are and they're on their way."

Wait. Is he going to lock us all in here?

"Asher, you can't keep us all here." My feet start moving me closer to him and I stop, because what the fuck?

He seems to think over his next words.

"Who said anything about keeping them here?" His eyes down my body. "They're free to come and go as they please."

Another pause.

"You, on the other hand..."

"Where even are we?" I refuse to look away from him. To back down.

His fingers drum against the concrete like every answer he gives me is a riddle. "Veilarath. We're on the other side of Veilarath."

He slams the door shut, trapping me with more questions. I should chase him. Demand answers. Veilarath has another side?

I face the window instead, watching water smash against the cliff until my heart rate levels.

The door opens again, and my spine goes rigid, but tension uncoils when Atlas's reflection peers back at me.

“If you’re here to tell me your brother means well,” I say, crossing my arms. “Save it.”

His footsteps cross the concrete, cutting off a few feet behind me. “Now have I ever lied to you?”

I huff out a breath. “I’m beginning to think I prefer being lied to.” My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. “Truth is beginning to feel a lot like hell.”

He has the same bone structure as Asher, same arrogant symmetry, but Atlas wears his face like he doesn’t set it on fire for fun.

He scans the books on the shelves. “Do you read?”

I shrug, my shoulder tapping the window. “Not as much as I’d like to.”

“Ah, busy life and all?” He rocks back on his heels, his mouth curving into a grin like I don’t get the joke.

That’s nothing new. I hardly ever get his jokes.

“Well you’ve got time now.”

I finally turn. My annoyance has nowhere else to go so I direct it at the next best thing.

“So what is this?” I ask, leaning against the glass. “Your part-time job. Keep me entertained?”

His grin widens. “I keep everyone alive.” Atlas shifts his weight, humor leaking out of his voice. “That’s the role.”

“You’re doing such a great job.” I curl my lip. “No blood has been spilled yet.”

He glances at the slip of skin between the waistband and my shirt, then checks my hair that looks like someone yanked it into place.

“Ivanya.” He says my name like he’s afraid it’ll bite him. Good instinct. I might. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

I step close enough for my toes to skim his shoes, tilting my chin. “Define stupid. Flirting with my husband’s twin while he’s busy fucking his ex?”

I hold his gaze. I could do this. This could take the edge off the shit Asher just dumped on me. A better woman would take the verbal punch he landed. Considering I shot him, that’s the least I deserve. Good thing I’m the worst fucking thing in this world.

Atlas narrows his eyes.

“Wait.” He smirks, but his body goes rigid. “Are you flirting with me?”

He has a nice throat. Is it weird to have a nice throat? “And if I was?”

His eyes widen, flying over my shoulder.

"Nope." I shake my head, snapping the thread before the tension mutates. "I can't do it."

"Agreed," Atlas chuckles, relaxing.

We laugh at the same time, though I'm sure it's not for the same reason.

"This is weird, but I thought I'd try it out." He doesn't need to know that I was testing his role in this whole thing. Good to know I don't have to fuck Atlas.

He tugs on his hair, still a little stressed. "You do this to get under his skin."

He keeps looking behind me like he's expecting Asher to storm back through.

"So?" I play, teasing because Atlas is easy. "And because you're standing here looking like the version of him that doesn't hate me."

Shit. *That* wasn't supposed to come out.

Atlas's mouth tugs to one side. "Because I *don't* hate you," he confirms, as if I didn't already know.

"But you've changed your mind with the flirting?" I bite back my laugh.

His gaze drops to my mouth, then snaps back up like he's been caught. "I'm not stupid enough to risk getting chopped up by my brother."

I roll my eyes. "Your brother won't chop you up. He's too busy planning his revenge on me."

Atlas reaches out and hooks a finger under the strap of my top.

"Don't get me wrong, I find you extremely attractive." His voice drops. "I always have and you know that."

He releases the strap and lets his hand fall. "That doesn't mean I'm going to do anything about it."

It's the first time I've seen Atlas drop the joke.

"Self-control." I tap his shoulder, keeping it light. "Love that for you. But relax. I'm not about to rub up on you in your sleep."

He groans and bites down on his fist. "Fuck, Ivy, you did not need to give me a visual of your fine ass all over me!"

I retreat toward the closet, desperate for space. Atlas follows, shadowing me by a single step. I wish he wouldn't.

"But for the record, Asher doesn't care about me in that way," I say, flattening out my tone. "Not anymore, anyway."

I grab a hanger and shove it aside. "He's too busy fucking Camille."

Atlas freezes behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, catching the tight pull of his brows.

“You talk like you know what he feels,” he says, his tone carefully neutral.

“I talk like I know what he does.” I lift my hand, the ring catching the light. “This is punishment. It’s always been about Camille.”

I drop my hand. Isn’t that obvious to everyone?

Atlas cuts his eyes to the closet. “Everything you’ll need is in there.”

“What’s everything?” I glance up the spiral staircase. “Maybe a time machine?”

When he ignores the question, I turn around.

He’s gone.

I didn’t buy any of these clothes. I flip tag after tag, checking every single one until I’m sure.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket.

I fish it out. The screen floods with notifications. Instagram first. The little heart icon sits pegged at 99+. I tap the app, and the comments stack up.

So happy for you both!!!

ASHVY FOREVER

SHE DESERVES THIS!

I double-tap a few without reading. Words blur as my thumbs move on autopilot.

Why do people trust fake smiles more than real frowns? The whole “don’t believe happiness on social media” thing has always bothered me. How do people need to be told that, yet still assume someone sharing their struggles online is only doing it for attention?

I swipe to TikTok.

Videos load before I can brace for impact. A girl with pink hair stares into her front camera, eyes wide, her voice pitched high with that kind of gassed up adrenaline one can only get from being a professional hater.

She hooks her thumb over her shoulder, pointing at the stitched-in clip.

“*So! Hold up! Last week, we saw Camille and Asher hooking up in a club!*” She stabs a finger at the video playing above her head. “*And now*

he's married to Ivy? I don't know. At this point, it's giving weird vibes."

I replay it even if it feels like being stabbed in the gut over and over again. Sure enough, there, in the middle of a fucking nightclub, is Asher with his mouth on Camille.

Two can play this game.

AN HOUR LATER, my bedroom door swings open.

I snap my laptop closed. "I think I'm starting to imagine shit."

Luce lifts a paper bag with an arched brow. "Did you happen to imagine greasy food that mends hearts?"

I gesture for the bag. Because yes. Food.

"I have to admit, I don't think I'd be complaining if I was locked in here." She dumps everything on the table and tilts her chin at the windows. "Also, who fucking knew Veilarath had another side?"

"I know." I peel back the wrapper and sink my teeth into the burger, chewing with zero intention of civility. "What I don't know is why he hasn't just killed me yet."

I don't bother swallowing. So unladylike. As if the Desert Eagle under my pillow didn't already make that obvious.

"Speaking of..." Her eyes slide back to me. "How do you feel?"

I slump against the bedpost, chewing around my words. "I'm confused." Why couldn't this soda be wine?

She watches me carefully. "Are you happier that he's still alive? Or upset?"

I'm not shocked that she's asking me this. We all rely on Luce to keep things real.

"I'm conflicted about both parts." I swallow my bite. "I was hoping Emeric would help. Maybe tell me that he already had it handled, or that, I don't know..."

I trail off, unsure if I'll ever find the right words.

Luce rolls her eyes. "You put way too much trust in that old man. I can't believe you talk with him like that."

Wiping my hands on a napkin, I shrug. "He's not who you all see." We've hammered through this exact conversation a dozen times over the

years.

“Anyway! I’ve done some research.” Luce digs into her Chanel handbag and yanks out a piece of paper, slapping it flat on the bed. “This is all I’ve gathered. The years leading up to last winter, Asher would go missing from time to time. I mean, obviously, the cameras followed his every move. But eventually, people gave up asking because he never answered and he’d always pop in and out of the spotlight. Fast-forward to last winter.”

She taps the timeline, leaving a grease smudge.

I scan the chaotic lines Luce drew.

“Punk said she bumped into Atlas on accident,” she says, blinking at me.

Silence spills between us before I lift a brow. “Are you saying otherwise?”

Her shoulders dip. “No, of course not.” She gestures to the pages. “Here’s what we know so far, right?”

She taps at the notes. “He’s a pro snowboarder, sure, but what else do people care about when it comes to Asher Jameson? The pretty face, the fact that he’s an heir, and that he’s known to fly off the handle now and then, using a swing-now-ask-later approach, but I don’t know, Ivy...” Her voice goes soft. “There’s something we’re missing, right?”

I lower the paper just enough to lock eyes with her. “If you say mafia, I’ll shoot you.”

“That’s fine!” She widens her eyes and pops a fry in her mouth. “I’ll come back in a year and marry you.”

I throw a fry at her and her laughter dies.

“Fine! I’ll stop playing. In all seriousness? Mafia? No. As if I’d go there without proof.”

She’s partly right. They both spend too much time playing to crowds to belong to any outfit. We’re also close enough to Chicago that they’d warn us if we started drifting into that world. Leon and their underboss trade shit over cognac. We’ve crossed borders for hits and shared intel on rival territories when it fattened everyone’s pockets. If Asher or Atlas had stepped into that blood pool, we’d have heard about it.

“Then what?” I ask, because no way are these two putting us in a spin. “Spill it, Luce.”

She chews slowly, holding my stare.

“Think patterns, Vanya. The winter before last, Asher ghosts, and then is hot and cold on you for months. Atlas sticks closer to the spotlight, but even he ducks questions about his twin’s downtime. And then fast-forward to last winter, to you—you know...”

My legs itch to move, and I shove off the bed and head for the window, pacing back and forth as if it doesn’t add water to an already steamed engine inside my head.

“Everything feels off,” I finally say.

My fingers trace the choker around my neck. “I can admit that.”

She slides off the mattress, crossing the room in two strides until her hands find my shoulders.

“Off is right.” She squeezes once. “But you’re not going in blind. I’ve got Punk digging deeper, off-grid stuff that doesn’t show up in searches. Even our own.”

I nod. This should be a relief because I trust them, but the knot in my gut pulls even tighter.

Am I contaminated? So much so that I can’t see through whatever smoke he’s blowing onto my mirrors?

Maybe I’ve unknowingly trained myself to believe monsters always wear the face of evil, when it’s love that makes for a perfect mask.

She forces my chin up. “Listen to me. If he is hiding something, you know we will find it.”

Luce is soft, but she’s soft like the wires that connect a bomb. She goes into everything prepared for carnage, sure, but she’s also the brain that holds us together.

This time, I’m not so convinced by her words.

I collapse onto the mattress. “I don’t know what he wants from me, other than my mind to torture. I’d prefer a bullet to the heart, if I got the choice.”

Luce flicks through images on her phone without looking up. “Sounds terrible. Is he going to fuck you in the meantime?”

I glare at her. “I’m serious, Luce! I’m too old for this.”

“You’re thirty-one, Ivy.” She drops the phone onto her thigh. “You’re nowhere near old.”

I drag my hand over my cheek. “That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

Her smirk dies. “I’m sorry. I know...” She gathers up the trash and drops it in the bag.

“Look. He’s not going to hurt you. At least not yet. It would defeat the purpose of all—“ She lifts both hands, gesturing blindly around the room. “—this. I say we scope him out. Play the game. See what his deal is and why he’s doing what he’s doing, and then when we find our opportunity, you leave for good.”

She grabs me by the face, forcing my attention. “I mean it, Ivy. You’re going to be free of this life. Even if it’s the last thing I help you do. This is a bump in the road, not the final destination.”

I want to believe her. God, if there ever was a time that I want to believe her...

“Anyway!” She claps her hands. “Atlas mentioned some small get-together tonight and showing face. Jord and Punk are somewhere, most likely getting the grand tour of this monster house.”

I chuckle. “It is annoyingly over the top.”

Everything stops.

“Wait, what do you mean get-together? I didn’t know about a get-together?”

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CHAPTER FIVE

ASHER

TWENTY MINUTES of watching this fucking screen. Twenty minutes of reminding myself why I need a brother. Why I shouldn't bury him in the backyard.

Jesus. I gotta pull my shit in.

Maybe it's been thirty minutes. Or maybe I stopped counting when Atlas made her laugh and flipped my murder switch.

I focus back on her, where she's on the bed, gesturing in that animated way she does when she's forgotten to perform.

Leaning back in my chair, I roll a pen between my fingers. Fucking Atlas. Always so charming and smooth. She wouldn't usually fall for it, but I can't tell anymore. This Ivy looks soft and unguarded as she laughs at whatever dumb shit he just said. This was the version of her I got when no one was looking.

Or maybe, this was just simply what she wanted me to see.

My jaw locks.

Why the fuck am I sitting in my office with a hard dick, watching my brother try to flirt his way into my...

She shot you.

She let you bleed out.

She fucking lied.

She's a puppet.

My fingers trace the thick scar banding my throat. There's an old saying, *les amants maudits*. It's more story than saying, but comes down to

one singular thing. Fate. The rest is some romance about born enemies who can't stay away from each other.

Bullshit. It's all fucking bullshit.

Romance has fuck all to do with love. There's nothing pretty about love. There's no fucking butterflies. There's pain in equal measure. Romance is the commercial, love is the sale. And I'm supposed to be the idiot who falls for the whole thing because she's got eyes that bring me to my knees and a mouth sent to this earth just to torture me.

Atlas says something and her smile dies. Her shoulders straighten, stare unmoving. She's concealing all her fears—despite her argument that she has none.

I know this tell.

I know *all* of her tells.

That's the problem with falling for someone built to destroy you. You memorize the shit you shouldn't because they're all the things you love about them.

I know her better than I know myself.

And she used every fucking detail against me.

My phone buzzes on the desk. Camille's name flashes, a string of messages I haven't answered. I'll let her wait. Let her wonder. She's useful for exactly one thing right now, and it has everything to do with pissing off my little Venom.

Ivy shifts away from Atlas. She's still talking, still moving, but it's all performance now.

Ah. I see. She's talking about me.

I see it when her mouth moves while her shoulders stay carefully neutral. She's giving him just enough truth to make the lie sound real. That's what she does. That's what they trained her to do.

I crush the pen until it snaps.

Atlas heads for the door. As soon as she's alone, she'll do what she always does when she thinks no one is watching. Let the mask slip. And I'll be here. Watching.

Always fucking watching...

A sharp knock hits the door, severing my thoughts. Sinead pushes through before I can respond. Very few people can enter this room without permission, and Sinead is all *one* of them.

They drop a parcel on my desk, ignoring Ivy moving across the monitor. Not that I hide anything from them anyway. Sinead already knows more than anyone else ever will, because why? Because fucking trust.

Ain't that a funny thing...

"It was dropped at the gate," Sinead says, nodding to it with a pierced brow.

I look up at them between inspecting the label. "By a courier, or a *mail man*?"

Sinead doesn't answer which is an answer on its own.

I tear open the wrapper until the familiar box peeks out. Pressed into the leather are the words *La Maison du Mal*.

My fingers follow each letter, the design hand-drawn and old as fuck. I wonder how many people came before me and sat in this same spot.

I flip open the case, revealing the family blade. It's about six inches long, curving at the tip. Dark leather wraps the handle, oiled to a shine.

Hello, old friend...

It's been a year since I held it. Fifteen since my father did.

Before I can shove the memories away, salt water clings to my throat, and the deck is shifting beneath my boots. I grip the leather of the chair, only feeling the cold metal railing from the yacht instead. Waves strike the hull with a crack, dragging me back into the present.

Sinead gives me a weighted smile. "The House always likes to remind us of the torment they've created."

I chuckle, because ain't that some truth...

Atlas strolls through the door, carrying her scent along with him. Like she fucking marked him just to torment me.

My hand tightens around the knife as Atlas scans the desk, the open case, the monitor still lit with Ivy's room, before zeroing in on me.

His mouth curves, because he's Atlas and he can't fucking help himself. He must say some dumb shit since Sinead burst out laughing.

I say nothing, keeping my stare locked on the screen where Ivy's moving around her room. When the silence is almost awkward, I look back down to the knife.

Sinead jerks a thumb toward the door. "I better go check on Daniel. Make sure he's comfortable."

Atlas steps deeper into the office, kicking the door shut with his heel. "You gonna tell me why you've got her room up like a fucking livestream,"

he says, quieter now, “or do I get to keep making jokes till you grow a personality again?”

I roll the knife once in my palm, setting it on the desk beside the journal I should *really* do a better job at hiding. “You seem real comfortable in there.”

Atlas leans one shoulder against the wall. “It’s Ivy.”

I look at him. “And?” His reply explains exactly nothing.

He doesn’t break away. “And it’s Ivy, Asher.”

On the monitor, Ivy pauses with the brush halfway through her hair, as if she can feel me watching.

Atlas follows my gaze, holding still for a second before turning back to me.

“You know,” he says, his voice light but careful, “I read a story about this once. Obsession doesn’t end—”

I let out a dead laugh, cutting off whatever else was about to spill from his mouth.

When he sighs loud enough that I know his common sense has failed, my eyes snap to him. “Don’t.”

One simple word is all it takes for him to back down. Never needed to raise my voice once to get my point across.

Atlas pushes off the wall with a whistle. “A gift from the holy ones?”

If I wasn’t still pissed about him smelling like Ivy, I’d probably snicker at the nickname.

Atlas tilts his head and swallows. “She asked about you.”

I glare at him. “I could tell.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Means,” I say, already over this conversation. “I know her better than anyone.”

“Asher,” his tone drops, arms lifting, and I know he’s about to deliver yet another reason to punch him in the face. “She cares about you. There’s no faking that shit!”

“That’s touching,” I drawl, and I’m about to start counting to ten if this asshole doesn’t back the fuck up.

He asks under his breath, shaking his head. “You’re being an asshole.”

“Good.” I bare my teeth. “Means she’s alive.”

His voice drops. “Whatever game you think you’re playing, you need to rem—”

A sudden shift on the monitor jerks our heads up. Ivy is already dismantling the closet, wrenching dresses off their hangers and shoving garment bags aside in broad, reckless sweeps. She knows exactly what she's looking for, leaving silk, cashmere, and shit she hasn't touched since the day I hung it up to pool in a mounting pile on the floor. She keeps moving without a single pause, never once looking down at the mess she's making.

This is a search.

I watch her hands as she clears sections, checking the seams and running her flat palms behind the stacked boxes. This is the instinctual reflex of a woman who knows dark rooms make for perfect hiding because she's usually the one lurking in them.

Tsk, tsk, Venom...

Every muscle in my body turns rigid, the absolute insanity of my own possessiveness is about to end with a bullet in someone else.

Atlas says nothing. For fucking once.

She freezes, the sudden stillness yanking me forward in my chair. One second she's ripping through the racks, and the next her fingers stall around something wedged deep between two garment bags, drawing it out with a hesitant slowness.

A white knit sweater.

She lifts it up, turning the wool over in her hands, and my whole body locks tight as I lean forward.

Does she recognize it? That it's the exact one she wore on the yacht?

Shrugging, she puts it back where it belongs and continues on. Of course she didn't recognize. That would require her to be in control of her own brain.

I slam my laptop closed before I fucking break it and Atlas lets out a long breath, "You wanna tell me what the fuck that was?"

"No?"

He grunts out a dry laugh, shaking his head at the floor. "Solid strategy."

I shove back from the desk. "It's worked great so far."

"Has it?" Atlas asks, brow arched.

I need a fucking drink. Pouring two fingers of whiskey, I leave the lid off and rest my hand against the bar.

"If you got a point, Atlas," I say, squeezing my eyes shut. "make it."

"I think you're losing your way."

My eyes snap open. Before I actually fucking swing, my hand finds the bottle again, leaving the glass behind because fuck it.

Taking a long swig of the expensive whiskey, I keep my eyes locked on his. When I no longer feel the fire in my throat and my stomach is about a second away from burning through my ribs, I lower it, swiping the residue off my lips.

“Camille’s on her way.”

His shoulders stiffen. “For dinner?”

My lip twitches. “To stay.”

Silence.

He recoils, shaking his head and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Jesus Christ, Ash.”

Why can’t he see the obvious reasons why I’m doing what I’m doing?

“It makes things easier.”

“For who!” He yells, spit flying from his mouth.

Me.

Nobody.

I lift the bottle like a cheers and shrug. “For The House.”

Atlas’s mouth twists. “Bullshit.” He must have grown an extra nut sack because now he’s almost up in my shit. “You think bringing your ex in here is gonna piss off Ivy.”

Another swig, this time filling my mouth until the whiskey burns my tongue before swallowing. “What I *think* is it establishes boundaries.”

“Also—” I add, sizing him up with a head tilt but not being completely serious. “Why are you in my face right now?”

All anger evaporates from his face as he steps back. Not a lot, because Atlas may be a gentler man than me, but he’s never been one to back away from a fight.

Laughter breaks the silence as his head tilts back. “Man, your guys’ fans are gonna eat you both alive!” All humor dies in his throat before his eyes slide back to mine, “Maybe you should just ask her about the incident so you can fight about it, have mad fucking sex, and move on instead of being so goddamn theatrical.”

A cold smile pulls at my mouth. “You really wanna defend her to me right now?”

“No.” He drags a hand through his hair, looking away for a split second before snapping back. “I want you to stop pretending this is about revenge.”

I shoulder barge past him because we're done here.

Before I can reach the door his voice stops me. "You bring Camille into this game and I know you're doing it on purpose."

Actually, you don't know shit.

"Regardless of my current issues," I say through clenched teeth. "I still have an obligation."

That should shut him the fuck up—

"I guess we're pretending your hands are tied."

Stepping backwards, I kick the door closed with my foot, closing us back in the room.

Now we're fighting.

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CHAPTER SIX

IVY

TORMENT WITH ASHER JAMESON just turned predictable. Not that I love the fact that she's here, but—seriously. Why the fuck else would she be here.

I need a drink. If I'm going to die, I'd rather do it indulging in coping mechanisms I've never allowed myself.

Vines of lace decorate iron railings, matching the dark slate underfoot of Asher's impressive rooftop terrace. I wish I could say it sucks. That it's as cold as he is and just as beautiful. But he'll have a better shot at getting rid of Camille than hearing me ever give him another compliment.

At least right now, while I'm still pissed from earlier.

On top of that, I can't get the jumper I found in my closet out of my head. There's something about it. The texture, the small buttons, the faint smell. I don't know what it is. Every time I try to dig deeper into my brain to figure out why, the recognition has already evaporated like it was never there.

Jord whistles and loosens his collar. "Damn. The man knows how to put on a show."

Champagne slides down my throat. "Mmhmm, which show are you referencing?"

He chokes on his drink. "Both."

Warm hands land on my cheeks, and then I'm staring up at my best friend.

"Hey..." he starts, but I narrow my eyes at him into a threat. He is not about to make me look weak in front of the enemy.

His hands fall away, along with the stress lines between his brows.

I made my point.

“Jord?” I whisper, walking on delicate ground. Jord isn’t sensitive, but my family have always been a safe space. “He married me for real. Why would he do that?”

When Jord doesn’t answer, I turn to him for some joke about Asher and Camille. His confusion grounds me instead.

“I really don’t know, Ivy.” He forces a smile but it looks painful. “I’m sorry.”

Well, damn. This isn’t a good situation to be in.

“I DON’T BELIEVE IN MARRIAGE,” I say, shrugging. I was aiming for nonchalance, but that was not my best performance. Maybe I should care more about my coping mechanisms, considering I’ve been at this—whatever it is—for however long it takes champagne to taste like water.

Punk peers at me through the flower arrangement. “Have you had your therapy session this week?” Her grin turns evil. “I’m telling Leon if you haven’t.”

Lucinda leans over and tops off my glass like the good friend she is.

“She can’t help me anymore. The reason why I needed her was because of that.” I wave my hand over my shoulder. “Now what? Hey, sorry, new trauma. The guy I was fucking, who I thought I killed, is actually alive, kidnapped me on my wedding day, which kicker, was where I was actually marrying him, brought me back to his mansion where I’m to live out the rest of however many days I have, as he parades around his ex in front of cameras for the whole world to see.”

Punk’s shoulders dip. “Ive, this is merely another job. Yes, you’re on the defense instead of the offense this time, but he *is* just another job.”

I set the glass down gently. “I’m well out of my depth here and you know it.”

“Well,” her eyes dart over my shoulder. “The cunt you married last time would disagree, since you had no problem putting him down.” She taps the table once. “Do the same here.”

I choke on my laugh, banging my chest when I almost swallow down the wrong hole. “Punk!”

She tilts her head to the side, lips spreading into a Cheshire grin. “What? It’s true. I hated Parker. I would have taken anyone but him.”

Me too.

Jord leans into me. "What do you think?"

I do my best to clean the tears from my under eye, my cheeks still stinging. "About what?"

"You know," he whispers. "All this?"

I go to answer when I sense someone behind me.

"I've gotta admit..." Atlas whistles. "Red looks good on you."

He drags a stolen chair over from the opposite table and drops it next to mine.

"Uh..." My body is all fuzzy and limp and I just laughed the most in months. Fuck Atlas, I won't let him ruin my vibe.

Punk reaches out and pinches one of the gold-plated leaves sprouting from the centerpiece. "It's like Rumpelstiltskin shat on this place."

Atlas snaps to her. "Good to see your acting skills are still spot-on, Punk." Leaning forward, he's clearly about to bait her. "Are you the same everywhere else? Or maybe I could inspect closer?"

Punk bats her lashes. "Actually, there's a lot about me that you don't know."

Her smile widens a fraction. "Like where my G-spot is. And while we're on the subject of my stellar acting skills..."

At least they can follow instructions enough to not get us all killed. Me, on the other hand...

And I need a refill.

Gathering the bottom of my gown, I push up from the table and my dress clings to me even further. The material swallows my every curve while the lace cups push my tits high, giving pretty impressive side-boob. I look good. Good enough to justify the obscene money and gym hours it took to get here.

Atlas' fingers curl around my wrist.

I pull away. "I'm going to get a drink."

He takes his time standing to his full height, slipping a hand to my lower back. "I'll get it! You don't need to be stumbling in front of her." His thumb grazes my spine. "She'll enjoy it too much."

I angle my body closer, brushing his hip on purpose.

"Hmmm." I tilt my face up. "Careful, baby twin. It almost sounds like you hate her."

Atlas's eyes brighten. Between him and Asher, I don't know where to start. For one, I'm not going to have Asher embarrass me in front of people since everyone knows we're married, and two? I fucking hate Camille.

His hand locks in place. "Maybe I do..."

I step in closer, enough to kiss his chin if I arched onto my toes. "I'm beginning to wonder if I fell for the wrong brother."

I know the second Asher's eyes find me. He's watching, which is kind of the point, so it only makes me go harder.

Atlas breaks into a full grin, lips brushing my ear. "Thank fuck you didn't, or it'd be me with the bullet."

Dramatic, but I leave it. I can't be bothered going back and forth with him right now. I'd rather just squash it into a box and save it for later or let it rot there.

Therapy starting to make sense...

A waiter passes and he switches my empty glass for a full one, directing me back down to my chair.

Maybe I misread Atlas and this situation—no. I never misread anything.

His palm glides over my thigh, flashing a small flower inked onto his middle knuckle that I never noticed before. Pretty.

"Will you be honest with me if I ask you questions?"

I trace the stem of my glass. "Depends."

Atlas leans into my ear again, his voice tight. "Do you think she's beautiful?"

He doesn't have to say her name. There isn't a single other person here he'd be referring to.

I finally allow myself to look at them. "I think she is."

He squeezes my waist gently and I bite my bottom lip when I reconsider our earlier conversation. Alcohol is really not my friend right now. Jesus.

"But are you known to see the best in people despite their obvious red flags?"

I bark out a laugh. "I would say I'm the opposite."

Camille's cackle at whatever Asher just said to her kills mine instantly.

I keep talking because it's a better distraction than murder. "I would say I purposely see the worst in people, because humans are fucking disappointing."

My grip tightens around the stem. "And in turn, it makes them easier to kill."

I let go and stand. I need air, silence, and a glass of water. “Don’t follow me.”

I spend the rest of the night mingling amongst people I have no idea who they are and dodging Asher and Camille. Camille isn’t so hard, since she’s doing everything she can to pretend I don’t exist.

Rustling through my clutch, I pull out my packet of cigarettes and zippo.

Ah. Sweet, sweet dirty habit...

Embers sizzle with each inhale as I dump everything back into my clutch and grab my phone—static prickles over my skin, locking me in place.

I inhale deeper than I mean to and nicotine punches my chest. “I’m beginning to think it was Atlas who spent time with me and not you.”

Ironic, really. I spent a massive chunk of my life avoiding any form of spotlight, yet the second I met Asher, I made every excuse why it wasn’t a big deal that it’s the centre of his.

His arm brushes mine and I’ve never sucked on a cigarette faster.

“Mmm. That’d be too perfect for you.”

Fuck it.

“What am I doing here?” I flick the cigarette and stomp on it, keeping my eyes on him. “If you want revenge, I’ll give it to you. Fucking take it!”

A hollow laugh slips from his chest, catching me off guard because it sounds so close to the man he used to be. Almost. It dies in his throat before I can obsess over it.

“Look at me,” he says, voice rough.

I lock onto the distant crash of the waves. “I kind of don’t want to.”

“Why?” He lowers his voice but doesn’t soften it. I’ll never make the mistake of confusing the two again.

He probably hates me even more because I killed his damn friend. A friendship I never asked about.

“Because it hurts.” Every time I’m around him, I fail. I fail to keep myself behind the concrete wall I spent so long building.

One thing is for certain, love wasn’t built for me. The second I felt it, I put a bullet in it. Now he’s here, standing in front of me as the shadow of the man he once was, and it’s my own fault.

With a finger beneath my chin, he guides my eyes up to his.

“It hurts, huh?” His grip tightens. “Probably not as painful as a bullet. So here’s what you can know. You will do as I say and live in my house. I don’t care who you fuck while you do it, but you *will* do it.”

His hand drops, as if touching me disgusts him.

“You won’t have to worry about feeling hurt for long,” he says, a smirk pulling at his mouth. “Because pretty soon, I’m gonna put a matching bullet right between those perfect tits.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

IVY

IT'S TOO QUIET. Way too quiet for this time of the morning.

I snatch my laptop from the side of the bed, carrying it to the table and flipping the screen open to punch in my password.

Text after text floods the screen as I sip on my latte. The perfect morning is caffeine and cigarettes, but I'll settle for caffeine and murder today.

No plays for you. Update me on the situation you're in

"What!"

Hell no was he going to lay me off during a time I need it most. If anything, it could be the only way I can get time away from this damn house. Not that I think Asher would make my case easy to plead, but it'd be worth a shot. And anyway, I've already decided if he wanted to stick a spy on me while I was doing it, I'd accept Atlas.

I dig through my laptop bag for my phone and hit his number when I find it. He should probably ditch this number soon, since he's had it for almost five years. Too bad he's pissed me off, now I'm not going to remind him that he's about three years outside of what we were told was the safe zone to keep a number.

It clicks over and I waste zero seconds.

"I need the distraction now more than ever!" Ew, that sounded too whinny. *Deep breaths.* "Let me try that again."

My heart slows, muscles releasing. “Please explain why I can’t be of use.”

Three years. I put up with Parker for three years until Emeric finally gave me the killshot order. For whatever reason, Emeric wanted to be thorough. No point tearing the weed if you don’t get it out from the root, so I waited.

And waited.

I’m not waiting anymore for anything else.

“You will not partake in two jobs at the same time.” Emeric’s deep voice scrapes closer to the receiver. “You are simply bored and want a plaything.”

Silence weighs between us.

Something shuffles in the background before he finally sighs. “May I ask what’s wrong with your current one? You break it already?”

“I’m doing my best to not be offended by what you just said, but since we’re on this subject, how the fuck did this happen?”

Nothing. Zero words are spoken.

My eyes narrow. “Do you know?”

“Ivanya, that conversation is for Nonna. However, I would like to discuss said toy.”

Yeah, I bet he does. Only he’s not doing a hell of a lot of discussing, since I can hear the faint sound of Gulls squawking in his background.

“In what context?” I push my latte away, leaning back in my chair.

“In the context of I can’t find out a single thing about him online that you can’t already read about on TMZ.”

Valid, since I know this for a fact.

His voice deepens. “Which means he’s hiding bigger secrets.”

My brow arches. “Bigger than what Punk could dig up?”

Silence again. His silence is bugging me. Not that he’s a man of a lot of words, because he’s not.

Unless...

Of course. He’s careful with everything he doesn’t understand, and right now, he doesn’t understand Asher, so he’s being extra paranoid. More than usual, and that’s saying a lot since the man has literally never shared where he lives. He could be in Asgard for all we know. It’s never brought up because one, the people who could are afraid to, and two, his trips to see us weren’t exactly frequent.

“Yes,” he mutters, and is that annoyance in his tone? I’d find it funny if I wasn’t still pissed.

“Well, I don’t think he does. He’s nothing but another example of what money can buy if you have enough of it. A whole life.”

Emeric makes a low sound, halfway between skepticism and agreement. “Tell me about him.”

This conversation is not going how I wanted it to.

“Not sure what else you’d want to know. Spoiled rich boy. His grandfather is Wickham Jameson, you know, the asshole who is always working in and out of shady hotel deals and basically owns every prime real estate in the Northeast.”

I blink when my eyes sting. “You know, I would much rather you be the scary monster everyone claims you to be, instead of the man I know you are deep down. It would make being annoyed at you harder.”

“I’m still that monster, Ivanya. It is only you who doesn’t see it.”

He leans forward, the leather of his chair rustling. “When I told you the boy was making you weak, I didn’t think he’d come back from the dead. We need to find out as much as we can. So in the meantime, no Plays. Can you access your back up drives without him knowing?”

I snicker. “Pretty sure I can access his *brother* without him knowing.”

Silence.

Rolling my eyes, I tap the screen of my laptop before dragging the mouse to my system drive. I open powershell and type in the code as files flood my screen.

“I have to admit...” Emeric says, voice closer to the receiver again. “You do look awfully pretty in white.”

I’m wearing a loose button-up, open to my bellybutton and lounge shorts. Hardly impressive.

I glare at the screen. “I’m in pajamas.”

“I see that.”

Years with Emeric, and I still can’t get used to his casual banter. It’s partially why I’ve always struggled to see him as the monster he is. Apparently, he never shared that same bond with the other family members.

“Tap on the one captioned A.D. Parker.”

I straighten, looking right through the webcam. “Why.”

“When did you start answering back?” He drawls, lazy and unimpressed.

My eyes narrow. “Are you drinking? You know how Nonna said you weren’t supposed to—”

“No, Ivanya, I’m not drinking.” The sudden flip in his tone sits me up straighter. “Tap on the name or I’ll do it for you.”

I sigh, dragging the mouse to the folder. A file loads onto the usual format when they assign a job. Name, age, address, blood type, all the boring things that make a human a person.

“What am I looking for?” I scroll down the page, past the details about his life, because I already know everything there is to know about the monster that stole mine.

“The reason you’re not getting any more jobs.”

The line goes dead.

I lower my hand and stare at my phone like it’s his face.

“*Fuck you,*” I mouth, flipping it off and slamming my laptop closed.

Parker was my main target, sure, but Emeric knows I rely on what I do to get me through. Almost the same way some do therapy. Did I want out? Yes. But I’m not stupid. There’s a system one needs to go through to get out of a life like this and it’s not done by depravation.

Not that I get off on killing people. To get our attention to begin with requires a certain skillset. Writing someone into a script and having us actually accept it are two very different things. We’re not the agency that most people think of when they want to get a job done. We’re silent, discreet, but also... selective. Our system works because we don’t have a high take-out list like others, such as Copper Ville, who kill just to kill and don’t care how. This is why they’ve also been on the radar of every task force worldwide.

In short, if you know who we are, then you’re walking in the right circles, because no one, literally no one, knows who we are unless we want them to. It helps with our one-hundred-percent success rate.

Until Asher.

I dump my coffee down the drain and decide to make it my mission to find the hottest outfit I can in my new ridiculous closet.

“You know who I am.” I flick past a dress, then another with a sharper swipe. “Yet here you are. Again. Standing close enough that I can count your pulse rate and reach you to stop it.”

Atlas props himself against the bedside table, one ankle over the other. “I have a proposition for you if you choose to accept.”

I pause on a black gown that dips low between the breasts. I hold it up by the straps, then flip it to check the back.

All skin.

Never mind.

I hook the hanger with a finger and carry it toward the bed. “What makes you think I’d negotiate with you?”

He rolls one shoulder. “Because I think you want to piss my brother off more than I want to.”

I turn with the dress still in my hands, letting him see my smile. “Some sort of buried family drama I don’t know about?” I lay the it flat on the comforter.

His left eye twitches. “You have no idea.”

“I wouldn’t usually be interested in getting between all that, but apparently I have free time now...” I ponder, lowering to the bed. “So continue.”

He takes his time studying my face. If he’s trying to figure me out, he’s shit out luck. There was only one man alive that could do that and I tried to kill him.

“Nothing serious.” He shrugs. “Just pure, undiluted drama for my dear twin.”

“Why?” I ask, because alas has always been better at answering my questions.

He chuckles under his breath, scratching his jaw. “Look, don’t get me wrong, you’re gorgeous. Probably high up there as one of the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

“Aw,” I say, clutching my chest in mock appreciation. Being on Atlas’ anything isn’t exactly a flex.

“—But I do have a thing for red flags.”

That earns him a chuckle.

“And...” My focus slips to the window behind him. “Continue your case.”

He clears his throat. “Ah, yeah. Alright. Here’s the deal. I have a specific job to do, and if I don’t do it, it’s not in Asher’s best interest. Yet his interest is my job. Does that make sense?”

“No.” I lean back on my palms. “But not much does lately. Let me ask you something. Do you consider yourself reckless?”

With zero hesitation, he crosses his arms. "You already know my answer."

I keep my eyes on him. "So in your free time, you fuck, party, and play?"

He nods once. "Absolutely."

Pushing off the bed, I pause briefly beside him. "That's why I could never play along with you."

I don't wait for his answer as I continue back to the closet, slipping out of my pyjamas and into a silk robe.

"You don't have any boundaries. Where's Asher?"

He glances between the clothes and my face. "Busy."

"Well let's unbusy him." I head for the hallway, stopping outside a set of doors directly beside my own. "What's in there?"

Atlas skids in behind me. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know if you know this," I say, turning to him. "But I don't need a babysitter." My back hits the double doors, finding the handle. "Or a spy. I'm not going to kill your brother. It's clear he simply can't die."

Thud.

My grin slips off my face.

Atlas stiffens.

"What was that?" I whisper, not exactly needing him to answer.

I'm moving before I realize it, pushing the door open with my fingertip.

My stomach drops.

Camille is sprawled across Asher's desk, thighs spread, her back arched so hard I can see each line of her spine. His fist is tangled in her hair, hauling her up to bare her throat as the mahogany desk scrapes across the floor with every hard thrust.

Caffeine and murder.

Atlas closes in from behind, his lips grazing the shell of my ear. "So can I have your answer now? Wanna play with me, Ivy?"

Asher's head snaps up, eyes locking on me.

His lips curve into a cruel smirk, dragging each stroke out slowly until Camille's whimpers turn ragged.

She moans into the scattered papers beneath her, her body tightening around him.

Every muscle in my body hardens, the floor beneath my feet swaying.

A hand slides over my hip, and Asher locks onto where Atlas spreads his fingers across my belly.

“Did you know we’ve shared her?” He presses through silk. “Often.”

Asher tightens his hand around Camille’s throat, tipping her head back. His tongue traces her jaw, moving over her cheekbone to her temple while never breaking eye contact with me.

Atlas nips at my ear. “Yet he wouldn’t... share you.”

I back us up until the door closes.

I need to get the fuck out of here before I do something that shows my entire ass humanity and Asher uses it as a weapon to destroy me.

My shoulder slams into Atlas as I barge past, desperate for my cage after all. I’ve played games. Many over the years. The only difference is they were safe, compartmentalized behind the fact that I didn’t give a *fuck*. Which means about zero right now, since I definitely do give a fuck.

As soon as I’m back in my room, I rest against the door. What is wrong with me? I need to pull my shit together.

I head for the bathroom, turning on the shower and not bothering to wait for it to heat before stepping under the spray of water.

Hopefully I can scrub the humiliation off my face, since my heart won’t calm the fuck down.

I kill the shower and wrap my body in a towel, swiping the mirror clean. *Rule three of the Codex, is there are no rules. There’s just contamination.*

My fist smashes into the mirror, sending glass flying. Blood runs between my fingers from a gash splitting the side of my hand.

I feel nothing.

Drip. Drip.

Three years being traumatized, fifteen becoming a weapon to dismantle people just like *him*. And it takes Asher fucking Jameson less than that to pull all my training apart. None of the training I ever did prepared me for this. For watching a man I...

My throat closes. *You don’t get to fall apart.*

I drop to the floor, clutching my hand. *What the fuck are you doing.*

Pulling the first aid kit from the cabinet, I flip through the items and grab my phone with my other hand, hitting dial on the group chat. I don’t care who answers. So long as it’s one of them.

Punk’s name flashes over the screen. She picks up on the first ring. “Hey, you!”

I sniff. "I need your help."

She pauses. I know what she's thinking. *Oh shit. Someone's about to die.*

"You ok?" She shuts out the noise with a click of a door.

"Yes," I tug the thread and needle and draw it through the hole. "I just need you. And Punk?"

Silence.

My mouth curves. "Bring everyone."

The first stitch goes in clean. Needle through skin, then pull, tie, and trim. I've done this a hundred times. This I *know*. Everything becomes steady, my breathing, my pulse. *My pain.*

Cleaning the wound, I press the edges together. "*Don't pull too tight or you'll tear the tissue, Ivanya. Don't leave it loose or it opens again.*"

I miss Nonna. *What was she thinking?* Did she know that David was Asher?

Wrapping up the wound, I toss everything into the bin before burying myself in the closet to find something to distract me.

Footsteps echo down the hall. Heavy, then slower, stopping right outside my door.

Air stalls in my chest as I creep closer, pulse swelling with each inch until I flatten my palm against the wood and slide down.

A soft thud vibrates through the door against my spine.

Everything hits me at once. From the stitches in my hand, to the ones you can't see.

Love.

I understand now why it was considered a contaminant in the Codex.

I'm sorry, Asher. For everything, but more than anything, for loving you.

Eventually, his breathing changes, and the footsteps retreat down the hall.

I turn my face just enough to hear better, committed to my own humiliation all the way down.

"Sinead." His voice cuts through the door. "Camille and I won't be home tonight."

The room tilts beneath me, ribs crushing down on organs that feel too heavy.

I can't breathe.

Camille and I won't be home tonight.

Everything blurs around me as the first tear drops.

I deserve every fucking second of this.

Playing the jealousy card would make me a hypocrite. I shot him, and with each day that passes I'm starting to think he'd never believe me if I told him how much I regretted it. How much I suffered that first year, feeling like part of myself died with him.

Camille and I won't be home tonight.

There's only one thing to do to fix this.

Play into it.

I STAND at the top of the spiral staircase, watching my plan unfold below.

Bodies grind across the living room as strobe lights flash and music shakes the floor. Coke lines the coffee table. A girl covered in glitter snorts a whole rail while a guy fucks her from behind.

Punk bumps my shoulder with hers. "I didn't know this kind of insanity lived inside you, Vanya. Have you been holding out on us all these years?"

I swallow champagne straight from the bottle and let the bubbles burn my throat. "Oh, this is new."

And it's true.

"Ah, sweet love," she sings, skimming the crowd.

I lift a shoulder as two guys climb onto the couch.

"I plan to tear that particular *problem* out before it does more damage."

My phone buzzes in my palm. Atlas.

Wow. You really outdid yourself, Ice Mommy. I brought friends too...

Ice mommy? Is he joking?

Punk stays on my shoulder, following me through the crush of skin and perfume. Influencers, tourists, whoever the hell she dragged in from the island. Did I expect there to be two hundred? No. But... *whoops*. I didn't expect to open a door and see him fucking his ex either, so here we are.

Atlas props himself against the doorframe with one arm draped over some girl's shoulders, smirking.

“Ivy.” He spreads both arms wide. “My beautiful disaster.”

People snap photos, lights flashing across the room.

He brings a joint to his mouth, and I steal it before he can light it, catching it between my teeth.

Flicking open his zippo, he shields the flame with his hand. “You good?”

I grab his collar and yank him close. “No, I’m not okay! These feelings are all new to me, Atlas, and I don’t know what to do with them except make shit burn.”

Smoke fills my lungs as I hand it back to him.

He squints through the smoke. “He’s going to kill you.”

I widen my eyes. “He can try, but I’m better at it than he is.”

Thirty minutes slip by. The music climbs higher, bodies pressing over each other. I’m done pretending I’ve got boundaries, because I fucking don’t. Not with him, not *ever* with him.

Shit. How drunk am I?

A bottle lands in my hand. Someone tugs me toward the stairs, and I grin, following. Burning my own life down feels good as long as his goes up with it.

At some point between my fourth bottle of champagne and losing count, I end up on Asher’s bed with three strangers. Silk shifts under my feet as I move with the music.

Taking a deep drag, I let the weed crackle between my lips, watching smoke wind toward the ceiling as my phone keeps flaring beside me.

A heavy thud shakes the room, and Sinead fills the doorway.

“You’re back.” I throw my arms up like a kid who just got candy. I can’t tell if I’m drunk on alcohol, high on weed, or snorting lines of that chaos...

“Ah.” Their brows dip, shoulders tight as they step into the room.

“Or are you a ghost? A figment of my fucked-up imagination?” I sway with the music and giggle.

Fucking. Giggle.

Sinead’s eyes shift past me before snapping back. They’re closer now, standing right beside the bed.

“No, but you might be.” Their hand locks around my arm, pulling me up.

I wriggle free and wag a finger. “Nah uh. You go tell your boss that he wanted to marry me.” I back toward the pillows. “So he gets to keep me.”

One of the men behind me hooks an arm around my waist, hauling me back onto the mattress before covering me with his body. Another catches my wrists and pins them above my head, grinning as if he's just claimed a prize.

Mmm. Maybe this is what I should've been doing all along...orgies with men ten years younger.

My phone lights up again.

I shove the man off and reach for it. Instagram opens to a photo of me taking body shots from a guy's chest.

First comment: Whatever he did we're on her side.

Second: It could have been cocaine. You do you, boo.

Third: I liked her better when she didn't talk.

I snap a screenshot, sending it to the group chat with three laughing emojis. The room sways as I sink farther into the bed, silk gathering beneath my thighs.

One man traces slow circles over my hip while another leans on his elbow, watching the smoke curl upward. The third scrolls through his phone, laughing against my ear.

"Ivy!" Punk rushes in gasping, one hand on the frame. She glances from Sinead to the mess sprawled across the bed. "We have a problem."

The mess being me.

I lift my head, squinting at her. "What kind of problem?"

Everything's too heavy, and I drop back down onto the pillow.

She steps toward me. "The husband kind!"

The door bursts inward with a splintering crack, revealing Asher in the doorway, shirtless and streaked with blood.

My lips curve upward into a smirk. Jackpot—he's fucking pissed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ASHER

I WIPE blood from my mouth, sneering at my fucking wife. Beating the piece of shit who let her take tequila off him does jack shit to ease the rage burning through me.

She gives a short laugh, lifting her chin.

My jaw tightens. “You think this is funny, Venom?”

Nothing outside of her exists in this moment, and I almost trip when I notice what she’s wearing.

Black lace clings to her tits, leaving nothing to the imagination. That paired with underwear so sheer I see the shadow of what’s *mine* beneath it, turns my vision fucking red.

Here she is, lounging in a bed like a queen holding court, surrounded by men who have no idea how close they are to dying.

She props herself on her elbows. “You look like you murdered someone.” Her gaze drags down my chest. “Did you murder someone, husband?”

I step over the threshold, glass crunching beneath my boots. “Not yet.”

My lip twitches. “But the night’s still young.”

One of the idiots lifts his hands and inches off the mattress. “Hey, man, I’m...”

I move before he finishes.

My fist closes around his collar, hauling him off the mattress. His feet catch and skid across the concrete as I drag him toward the glass doors.

His mouth opens on a weak plea, swallowed by the static screaming in my ears.

Glass explodes when his body goes through it, rolling twice, before he stays down with a groan, clutching his stomach.

I turn back to the bed. Ivy hasn't moved. Those green eyes find me through a veil of smoke curling around her, the joint burning down to a roach.

Amusement crawls across her face. "Feel better?"

My mouth pulls to one side as I close the distance. "Not even close."

The other two scramble off the mattress, tripping into each other on their way out.

Sinead steps forward with a hand up. "Asher. Maybe we should—"

"—Get out."

They glance at the glass. "The guy on the patio..."

Without breaking eye contact from Ivy, I repeat, "Get. Out."

Movement stirs to my side before the door clicks shut and then it's just me and her and my rage.

Silence.

"You're bleeding on your sheets." Her head tilts as she follows each drop.

My lip twitches into a sneer. "Not my bed."

But my fucking woman.

My hands close around her ankles, dragging her down the bed until she hangs over the edge. I snatch the burned-out joint from her fingers, flicking it into the corner. When she catches my wrists to steady herself, I see the bandage wrapped around her hand.

"What—"

She jerks her hand away.

I plant my fists beside her head and hold her there, my hips braced against hers. Blood drips onto her collarbone, tracing the curve of her shoulder.

I tilt my head. "Did you fuck them?" Pause. "In my house."

She laughs, sarcasm dying in her throat. "Would you rather I fuck them in your office?"

I tense.

"Over the same desk you did Camille?" She adds.

Oh, we can play that game...

“Would you rather it was you?” I say, tossing her words back at her like I didn’t wish it was.

She doesn’t answer.

I lean in until my lips brush her ear. “Should I get one of your toys back in here?” I drag a knuckle down her cheek, leaving a red smudge.

My fingers close around her throat. “Maybe get him to finish you off. *Clearly* he didn’t fuck you hard enough to knock the attitude out of you.”

She glares up at me like the little venomous monster she is. “You fucked her.”

My mouth snaps closed.

Her lashes fan out over her cheeks when she blinks, but there’s no real fight in her. “In front of me.”

“Get naked and make it look real.”

Camille groans, dragging a finger down my chest. “Why can’t we fuck for real? It’s not like you haven’t hit it already.”

I slap her hand away and haul her in by the throat. “Because I don’t fucking want to, that’s why. Because fucking you is about as fun as doing it myself.”

My knee drives between her thighs, forcing them apart as my hand stays firm around her throat. I shift my weight until she has no choice but to feel me.

I grind against her, trying to swallow how fucking good it feels. A low growl rolls from my chest. “You want to talk about fucking, Venom?”

Her body bends into mine, the movement so small I know she’s fighting it.

“You put on this little show.” I roll my hips, dragging her over my cock. “You invite strangers into my house.” I roll again.

Her nipples harden against my chest as she presses closer.

“...And you think I don’t know exactly what you’re doing?”

Her hands fly back to my wrist. “Enlighten me.”

She’s so fucking close, her attention shifting between my lips and my eyes.

“You’re jealous.” I slide my free hand down her side and hook two fingers into the sheer waistband of her underwear. “*Furious* that I fucked Camille.”

My mouth hovers over her pulse as I try to block out all the things that made me obsessed with her in the first place.

Her nails bite into my wrists. "I don't care who you fuck."

I lift my head, my eyes widening. "Liar."

"Bet you're fucking wet." I push my hips down, pinning her there. "All this rage. All this hatred."

Dragging my tongue up her throat, I regret it the instant her taste hits me, and I ain't talking about just her skin.

"And your body's begging for me anyway."

She writhes beneath me, though I can't tell if she's fighting my hold or grinding into it, so I shift an inch anyway, forcing her to chase it.

"It's fucking foreplay to you," I murmur against her jaw.

She starts to sit up, drawing two deep breaths as though weighing her next move. Before she can do some crazy shit like kiss me, I press my thumb into the hollow of her throat, holding her there.

"Say it." I keep my gaze fixed on hers. "Tell me you want me."

Her eyelids droop, her mouth twisting. "Fuck you."

I laugh, releasing her throat and pushing off the bed, leaving her flushed and panting.

Backing up, I tilt my head. "Camille screamed my name when she came."

My lip twitches. "Three times."

I don't look back. If I do, I'll fucking drown in her.

"Sweet dreams, Venom."

I make my way down the hall, ignoring every fucking idiot that's doing a mad dash for the front door. She wanted my attention? She fucking got it. Now I want nothing more than to rip hers from her too.

As soon as I'm locked in my office, I let out a deep breath. Fuck. I probably deserved it. No, I definitely deserved it. The Camille show was uncalled for and not exactly my style, but I know it's what she expects of me. It's what she'd expect someone my age to do after being hurt by the one person he never expected to hurt him. So I gave it to her on a silver platter. But her retaliation wasn't expected. Ivy's always been too unbothered to be messy.

I drag my hand over my cheek. I'm gonna kill Atlas. Bury his ass right beside dad just to piss him off.

Tapping the monitor, I watch her storm down the hall and disappear through her bedroom.

I snicker, grabbing the discarded hoodie at my side and forcing it over my head. Instagram notifications flood my phone, all variations of the same question.

When are you hitting the slopes, Asher?
When's the next run?

When when when.
Fucking never.

I thumb through them anyway, letting the mindless scroll flatten the jagged edges still rattling around my skull. Some fourteen-year-old from Germany tagged me in a video of a backside double cork, captioned "thoughts?" My thoughts are that I want to put my fist through something until I feel bones crack and the rage stops fucking vibrating.

Movement flashes on the monitor.

Ivy's bathroom. The mirror above the sink is a spiderweb of fractured glass, despite her efforts to clean up the mess.

My phone slips and hits the desk with a thud.

I lean forward and tap the screen twice to zoom, then hit rewind. The footage stutters backward, light reversing through the window of today. Then I find it. Her fist connecting with the mirror.

The angle's shit but I can see enough. Her shoulders shaking, one hand braced on the counter while the other swings, glass exploding outward, her reflection splintering into a hundred broken versions of herself.

How fucking accurate that image is...

I check the time stamp. Right after she walked in on me and Camille.

I sit back, my hand finding the drawer without looking and pulling out the pre-rolled joint and lighter. Flame catches the tip. I drag in deep and hold it until my lungs burn, then slowly release, watching the smoke curl in lazy rings.

On screen, she's stopped. She's sitting there, shoulders heaving, head tipped back. Even through the grainy feed I can see her working hard to compartmentalize. Then she wipes her face with her uninjured hand and opens a cabinet, pulling out a suture kit. Stitching herself back together like it's no big deal.

I take another pull, letting smoke sit heavy on my tongue before exhaling through my nose. The rage is still there and it wants to hunt down every man who touched her tonight, but that can't be me. That can't be who I am, wearing the title I do now.

She finishes the stitches and tests her hand, opening and closing her fist a few times. Thirty seconds later she has her phone pressed to her ear.

Ah. So this is how we got to where we are right now.

Interesting.

Thoughts drift through the smoke and land in an empty void in my chest as she moves through her bedroom. She pauses, head snapping toward the door.

Wait. Did she know I was there?

I sit up in my chair, tilting my head and zooming out further, opening a second frame that's outside her door.

There I am. Hand hovering a few inches from the handle.

Inside the room, Ivy's still frozen mid-step.

My jaw tightens.

She knew I was there. *Of course she fucking did.*

The moment plays out from both sides of the room. My body turns, leaning back against her door as I rest my head. Regret almost had me breaking it down and coming apart. What I didn't know was that she was right there too, with hands ready to fucking catch me.

Two sides of the same door. Of the same life. Yet neither of us can fucking open it.

CHAPTER NINE

IVY

SNOW KICKS off his board in a fine spray as he skids to a halt.

I push the swing with my foot, rocking it in a slow arc. The past few days have been the calmest since I landed in this mess. Asher's been gone. Atlas is quieter than usual. Sinead and Daniel are acting like they've known each other for years.

Asher shakes the powder from his jacket.

I pause my movements.

Snow clings to his dark hair before melting against the heat of his skin. He looks good. Annoyingly good. Good enough that I want to shove him back down the mountain.

"You're alive," I say, all bright and fake.

"Disappointed?" His mouth curves into a grin, dragging me back to who he used to be. To the version of him that I ruined.

I hold his stare. "Undecided."

He unclips his bindings, stepping off the board. I'd spent three days of silence wondering where he was, who he was with, and whether he was fucking Camille in private the same way he liked to in public.

"Good to see there's at least some part of you that hasn't changed," I say, blowing steam off my hot chocolate.

"What else exactly is it that you think has changed?" he asks, his tone level as he climbs the steps.

I bat my lashes. "Would you like the list?"

He hesitates, and I wonder if for a brief moment he remembers how we used to banter, but then he brushes it off and drops down beside me.

Heat crawls up my throat as I try to squash the memories of how his body felt weighing mine down just three nights earlier. I know I'm being pathetic, weak, a fucking cliché, but my mind is the only place I don't have to perform.

When I first met him, I appreciated how we could sit in silence and not feel alone. That hasn't changed. But all it does right now is remind me that I should apologize, only if I start, my apology won't end there. It'd go deeper, and onto bigger shit that I'm not sure he's ready to hear much less I am to say.

"Have you fucked Atlas?" His words snap my head toward him.

Jesus fuck, where did that come from?

"What?" All fight drains out of me because every time I look at this frustrating man, I fold. He doesn't have to know it, and I sure as hell would never show it, but it's there. A weight I carry everywhere, my biggest regret, and I'm not talking about all the nights I crawled on top of his dick either.

"Why?" I ask, because I what the fuck is he talking about?

"You don't ask the questions, remember?" He softens, turning into me.

"He's not always who he says he is either, you know..."

I choke on my laugh. I won't even dignify that with an answer. He can fucking brew on it while he's balls deep in Miss Universe.

"Oh," I say, jerking back a little. "And you are?"

"—And *you* are?" he fires back, smirking. I wouldn't have caught it if I wasn't dissecting every micro-expression.

I need to stop that.

My focus shifts back to the yard, lifting my mug. "I had no intention of fucking anyone, nor have I, but since you like to broadcast exactly where your dick goes..."

My throat tightens around the memories.

"I may be inclined to change my mind. I have to ask, though." I pivot my body into him, resting my elbow on the swing's edge and offering him my undivided attention. "What does Camille think about all this? Or does she truly have no self-respect."

His left eye twitches as he leans back, stretching his arms across the swing's full width.

I flinch as if his touch physically hurts, and the deepening of his smirk proves he noticed.

Bastard.

Our bodies cannot exist around each other.

“One?” He lifts a brow. “I never planned on being married. Not even to Camille.”

The way he confirms it as if she’s the bar he’s set is enough to almost send me over the edge.

I tuck stray bits of my hair behind my ear. “I guess you’re still young enough to find someone you want to marry.”

His eyes narrow. “Yeah, because that’s it.”

My mouth opens to answer back, but he shakes his head to cut me off.

“Shut up, Ivy,” he rasps, the words dragging slow over a chuckle. “I don’t wanna talk about this shit anymore. I don’t care about any of it. I just want you to suffer the same way I did.”

I wince, not caring if he sees, my chest tight with the words trapped inside.

“And what makes you think I haven’t already? That I didn’t during that first year?”

He goes still, those wolf-bright eyes as cold as ice. “Because you haven’t tried to kill me again.”

My phone vibrates over my belly, cutting into our conversation. I turn it over to see Leon’s name flashing across the screen.

“Hey!” I answer, ignoring Asher beside me.

“Are you ready?” Leon asks around shuffling in the back.

I place my mug down on the table in front of me.

“Ready for...” I ask, trying to think of all the things I may have forgotten since being so wrapped up in this mess.

Leon groans. “I fucking knew you’d forget. It’s La Journée du Nous.”

Shit.

I fly to my feet. “I forgot!”

La Journée du Nous is a family tradition Nonna created after mine and Leon’s first massive fight. A promise we all made that it didn’t matter where we were, who we were with, when that day came, we all dropped everything and flew to whatever destination she chose.

“Yeah,” Leon growls, too tired to be completely annoyed with me.

Will Asher even let me out?

“She’s choosing home this year,” he adds, as if that’s going to make it any different.

Désamour.

“We’re flying out tomorrow.” Leon pauses. “You can *leave*, right?”

Words catch my tongue. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Ivy...” he warns, and I know a Leon lecture is about to drop if I don’t hang up.

Pressure coils me tight. “I said I’d figure it out!”

Silence.

Leon has always been the one who sees through me without needing to dig. He’s always just... known. And right now, he *knows* I have no idea if Asher will let me walk out of here.

“Tell her I’m coming,” I force out through gritted teeth.

He scoffs. “I’m telling her nothing until you’re on a plane.”

The line cuts and I pull the phone from my ear, staring at Leon’s contact photo, a blurry shot of him mid-laugh from two summers ago.

Asher hasn’t moved from the swing, and I don’t have to turn to know he’s looking right at me.

“Important?”

It’s a simple question for a not-so-simple answer. I have no idea what to say right now and considering one wrong word might fucking ruin any chance of him saying yes, I flash a smile instead.

“Maybe. I just need to—” My thumb jerks over my shoulder before I’m dashing for the door and heading inside. Warm air hits my skin as I quicken my pace down the hall and into my room.

A small overnight bag sits on the bottom shelf of my closet, and I waste zero time tossing it onto the bed. My hand dives between the mattress and the frame, moving around until I find my gun.

I haven’t been to Désamour since we left. It’s home. It always has and always will be home. I should be excited to go back, since the opportunity has never come up, but all I’m left feeling is...

Nausea.

Asher’s voice cracks from the doorway. “And—where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

I freeze, Desert Eagle swinging off one finger.

Atlas appears behind him, hands raised as if to stop whatever war is about to erupt, only to do a double take on what I’m holding.

His brows jump. “No offense, but you shouldn’t be allowed weapons anymore.” He turns to his brother. “Tell her she’s not allowed weapons anymore.”

There’s no escaping. Even if I could run, I don’t want to. “I have to go home for a family tradition.”

Asher looks to the side, chuckling. “Not happening.”

My chest caves in, strangling my reply. “Asher...”

The magazine slips out of the chamber, landing in the palm of my hand.

I replace it without breaking eye contact. “It’s my...”

How am I going to explain this? He and I have never talked about our families, never shared a single detail personal enough to go deeper than the surface of who we were to each other. It’s why I fell for him, and why I was probably so easily tricked by him. And vice versa.

Wait...

I straighten, pointing at his chest. “You should come. It’s not like we wouldn’t be seen with each other anyway?”

His features don’t give any of his thoughts away as he moves further into the room.

Atlas shrieks, lunging for the weapon in my hand, but my arm snaps back before he can take it.

“You are not touching my gun!”

Fingers close around my elbow from behind. Asher covers the hand that’s holding the gun. I still haven’t worked out which one he’s trying to claim, the weapon or me.

He takes it, clicks the safety, and locks it away.

Guess that answers that...

Footsteps sound outside my door before Daniel appears, his attention bouncing between the three of us.

Asher angles his body to stand in front of mine as if on instinct.

I try to shove him out of the way. “Well, this is the start to every porn *ever*.”

No one laughs.

Daniel looks between my bag and my face. “La Journée du Nous, I didn’t realize it was so soon.”

You and me both, friend.

I glance up at Asher, expecting to read one hundred silent questions, but his expression is flat. It’s like rereading your favorite book, one you’ve read

so often that you can recite every line, when all of a sudden the words don't make sense. I can't read him like I used to. He's built a wall around the parts of himself that felt like home.

Asher ignores Daniel. "You ain't going, Venom."

He's going to make this difficult for me. Everything is always going to be difficult.

"I don't care if you kill me. You can. I don't care. I earned it, whatever. Death? Death is simple to me. It's something I made peace with a long time ago. You don't do what I do and expect not to die, Asher."

I fight with everything inside of me to not touch him, to not show any kind of weakness that he can use to destroy me, but my body vibrates with every passing second, nausea flipping my stomach upside down.

Fuck it.

I slide my hands up the side of his neck and rest them on his cheeks. "But I need you to do it after we're back."

I've already said too much, felt way more, and the longer I'm around him the worse it gets, so I brace myself for the rejection. For him to push me away, probably into Atlas to deal with me, if I had to guess the vibe of what his duty is.

His finger hooks beneath my chin, killing every thought in my head. He tips my face toward his, and the panic clawing at my ribs eases.

Blue eyes hold me there. For a single, stupid moment we're back to how we used to be.

What made you this way? Probably fucking me.

His pupils dilate as his grip loosens. In a flash, that softness is gone, jaw hardening. My legs turn to jelly and it takes all my concentration to not fucking drop.

"No." His thumb circles the side of my cheek before he leans in, lips grazing mine. "You have to be safe, Venom." This was the Asher I rem—"Only I get to kill you."

Reality collapses around me as he walks away.

Only I get to kill you.

I had it twisted. Asher isn't addictive because he's a drug. The drug is dirty. It's the part people don't want. Asher is the high. He's what makes you crawl back for more.

Of course he wouldn't make this easy for me. Asher is young, but he's not stupid. He's years beyond his age.

And I'm a fucking idiot.

I push forward with Daniel trailing behind me. We hit the main foyer and I scan the room, wondering which door he went behind.

"Ivy..." Atlas calls out, but his voice dies in the background as my hand finds the handle of the door beside mine.

His body moves between me and my plan. "Wow! No, you don't want to go in there."

"Move, Atlas!" I shove his arm out of my way.

As if I could see worse than I already have.

His hand slips into mine briefly, taking my phone.

"Fine!" he yells from behind, and the door swings open as the words leave him. "I warned you..."

Asher flicks a pen across his desk, leaning back in his chair and zeroing in on me. "What now, Venom?"

"Listen." Now that I'm here, I forgot why it was important.

Why was he in a rush to get away from me, anyway?

His gaze follows my movements, as if my presence doesn't bother him the same way it keeps me up at night. He's going to kill me anyway, may as well word vomit my way into the ground.

"I can't miss this," I repeat, lowering to the single sofa that faces him. It's far enough to grab a weapon if he attacks, but close enough to catch every emotion.

He holds my stare. "You said that already."

I could tell him. Tell him about our family tradition, but he won't understand what it means if he doesn't understand how it started in the first place.

This is bad.

Emeric is going to lose it. I can't. Or... maybe he already knows? Since he seems to be privy to so much already.

Even if he doesn't, I'm sure this whole situation is way out of L'Abattoir Codex. Surely the rules are moot at this point. I don't remember a section of *if kidnapped and being held against your will by a subject you thought you killed, who also happens to be the only man you've ever loved, here is what you are to do...*

"I need to tell you something." I hold my breath.

Twelve.

Twelve years old, I turned off the faucet that fed my emotions and swore never to allow it to open again. Clearly, I missed the times that Asher had slowly worked to loosen it.

He already knows what I do, but he doesn't know the mechanics of it.

"Stop." His lip curls, the edges of his stare darkening.

Even dressed casually, he fills the room with more power than anyone would in a suit.

How, after all the people I've been toe-to-toe with, is it him that brings me to my knees?

A groan distracts me from behind. "Ah, fuck. My bad..." Atlas murmurs, as Asher's long legs eat up the space between us.

His words are for his twin but his focus never strays from me. "Get out."

The door clicks closed as Asher rests against his desk, fingers wrapping around the edge. He squeezes so hard I swear I hear the wood splint before he releases the tension.

"Don't." His face stays hard as stone. "I already know."

My mouth opens, needing him to elaborate but also fucking terrified if he's right. "What?"

He drags his tongue across his lip, looking to the side briefly before a sarcastic chuckle leaves him. "I already know."

My stomach bottoms out. "No, but..."

"But nothing," he snaps, baring his teeth. "Don't say another fucking word."

A chill spreads through me, freezing me in place.

I fell in love with Asher because he was the opposite of the men I knew, the men I was around, the man I *married*. I loved him because he knew how to be gentle and funny, yet another side of him could be hard and protective. I saw it once and wanted more.

He's a damn honey trap with pretty eyes.

We don't say another word, but the world slows, failing at translating the silence that passes between us.

Finally, I shake my head. "Impossible. How long have you known?"

My chair scrapes against the floor before I realize I'm pushing away from him. "Who are you?"

How would he know exactly who we are? No one knows who we are but the people who are meant to know. Not a single intelligence in the

world could scope us, so how could someone like him?

Silence stretches between us. When I think he's not going to say anything at all, the corner of his mouth twitches.

"Mmm." His head tilts to the side as he takes his time dragging his eyes over every inch of my body before landing back on my face. "Not very fucking nice finding out the person you fell in love with may not be who you thought they were, huh?"

"Maybe," I say, doing my best to ignore his admission to loving me and focusing on the catastrophe of this moment. "But I didn't lie about the fact that I fucking *loved* you, Asher."

Okay, that wasn't the plan, but I guess we're doing this now.

"Oh?" His brows shoot up. "Before or after you thought you killed me?"

My jaw locks.

Everything shrinks around me because check fucking mate. Because I know I deserve his wrath, since I fucked up first. Because no matter how many times I tell him I'm sorry, or that I truly loved him, it won't change the fact that I still aimed a bullet right at him, point blank, and watched him die like he was the enemy.

I'm a monster.

I'm a fucking monster just like them.

I wrap my arms around myself like it's going to stop my insides from spilling out. "I'm sorry..."

He snickers. "Ivy, I don't want your apology. I want you to tell me who ordered it."

Everything stops.

Time, my thoughts, my damn breathing.

His tongue rolls over his bottom lip as if contemplating how to articulate his next words. "I don't have time for this bullshit. Tell me who it was so I can deal with it and move the fuck on."

To be fair, this isn't an exactly out of pocket claim, since it's the most logical reason as to why I did what I did.

Only, logic doesn't have shit to do with it.

I let the words roll from my mouth slowly. "Even if the target was you, I don't know who orders it. That's not how this works."

I hold my breath, hoping he'd fill the silence with more of his own conspiracies, since it seems healthier than I don't know... fucking your ex,

marrying your enemy, throwing a party in your husband's house and letting him think you've been spit-roasted by other men.

The smile I try to force dies before it even forms.

"Just know that it wasn't you..." Realization dawns on me. "Wait."

I lift my hands. "Do you think my falling for you was me moving in on my new target? As in black widowing you?"

He doesn't answer, holding me in place with a stare I never want to be on the receiving end of again.

Every piece of rubble from every single wall he's eradicated drops down on me all at once. My brain turns to static as saliva fills my mouth.

"You weren't!" I whisper, my body shaking.

I need him to believe that.

He looks right through me like anything I say means less than shit.

"Asher." New direction. How can I make him see reason? "If it was you, why did I kill... attempt to kill you on the spot?"

His gaze drops to the choker locked around my neck before trailing back to my face, once again unbothered. "Because some shit went haywire between you and Parker and you needed to get it over with quickly."

Laughter dies in my throat as I fall back in my chair. "I don't have time for this."

I bury my face in my hands, dragging my fingers through my hair until it falls around my face. I don't even have time to unpack *why* he would think his name would appear on a roster of evil fucking people.

He widens his stance. I don't bother hiding my gawking as I travel up his thighs and past the planes of his stomach, until slowly landing back on his face. From this angle, he holds every card. With anyone else, that wouldn't fly, but with him...

"Wait." There's a lot of *waiting* going on, but every time I think I've worked something out, I land back at square one. "How do I know I wasn't your target?"

His jaw clenches. "Because I'm not a hitman."

He doesn't sugarcoat his words, leaving them out in the open for anyone to consume.

I freeze, head turning over my shoulder to assess every threat in the room.

He deadpans. "No one can hear shit."

Tension snaps and I can breathe again. "So, if you're not, then..."

My brows pull inward. I need them not to since Botox isn't exactly cheap, but the confusion of his words only pulls me deeper into the mud.

"I'm not," he repeats, his tone final. "You know who I am, Ivy. I never hid that shit from you. I showed you the real me when everyone else got the masked version, not the other way around. You know me better than I know me."

Pause, and those dark edges eat away at the wolf-blue in his eyes again. "It's me who doesn't know you."

He's telling the truth. Even if I wasn't *contaminated* with whatever it is I am with him, the Codex doesn't lie.

My training doesn't lie.

He isn't lying.

Not a single piece of art hangs on the walls. No photos, no trophies, no signed basketball insignia. There's absolutely no hint at who it is that lives here. It's oddly strange, since Asher has too much personality to not spread out.

He clucks his tongue, dragging me out of my observations. "Finally, you're taking in your surroundings. A little slow with that one, aren't you?" He pauses, studying me. "You're wondering how I know who you are, when it's the biggest secret. The only people who know are the likewise ones, true?"

His words die in the back of my mind.

I need something. Anything at all that can give me even a hint as to who I'm dealing with.

Books line a single shelf behind his chair and above an open fireplace, but I can't make out the titles from here.

Glass windows on either side of the wall display the backyard playground found in every man's wet dream.

There's nothing.

Not a single damn thing that gives anything away in here. Not even a computer, or TV, or any form of electronics. Asher is a complete contradiction to everything I thought I knew.

I sigh, bending down to massage the throbbing in my temples.

Who the fuck is he?

"Anything catch your attention, Ivanya?" he asks, using my full name.

It doesn't add up. None of this adds up.

“So, you were saying you want to leave?” He adds, and I appreciate the switch of subject since I’m pretty sure this one is about to make my head explode. “Why? Tell me what La Journée du Nous is and who the fuck is the ‘us’?”

Keep it simple. Asher prefers things that way.

“We live by a particular set of codes, and one of ours is family. To you, it may sound like just another day, but it’s our day, and we never miss it. It is absolute, Asher. I can’t break tradition because you’ve decided you can’t just kill me and get it over with.”

I push up from the chair, staring directly at the wall of his chest. “Kill me now or we go.”

Silence.

Corded vines spiral around his chest, my eyes tracing them all the way up the side of his neck. Did he add more?

His forefinger and thumb skim over my chin, angling my face up to his.

How. How can the man who ripped my life apart still look like the only safe place left to stand?

“Nah,” he murmurs softly. “I’m not fucking done with you.”

All the air in my lungs evaporates.

“And you and I both know it would be as simple as me locking you in a room to live out the rest of your days if I *really* wanted.”

Electricity sizzles over my lip when his thumb brushes across it.

Seconds.

Minutes.

A damn lifetime.

Neither of us break eye contact, the battle he’s fighting displayed over his face with every twitch of his jaw. Every squint. Every sneer.

He growls, so low I feel it more than I hear it. “If I agree to this, you get two days tops.”

I nod, warmth trickling back through my body with a fragile sense of hope.

His fingers weave through the back of my hair and he uses his grip to pull me in closer.

“I get the family shit, Venom, but we have a score to settle.” He squeezes tighter. “Two days and then we come back.”

I know I should let this go and be happy with the answer he’s given, but Camille pops up in my head as a reminder that yes, we do have a score to

settle, but we also have another thing in common.

Pride.

“As what?” I whisper, not even sure what it is that I’m asking.

He releases his hold and air floods my lungs. Every step he takes proves why I’m screwed, why at the end, none of this will matter.

“As your brother’s plaything?” I scoff. “I think the fuck not.”

Movements stop as his eyes snap to mine. I don’t care if I’ve pissed him off. Hell, I don’t care if he puts a bullet in me right now. I care whether or not I’m going to have to explain to him at a later date that I killed his ex because I can’t stand seeing him with her.

I lift a single brow. “You want me to fuck Atlas so you don’t have to feel bad about Camille, is that it? Or what? Is this part of the twin sharing thing that I’ve been missing out on?”

His eye twitches.

I continue. “Or maybe I should take him up on that offer...” I gaze off into a distant play-by-play of a made-up fantasy. “I wonder if he’s as good with his tongue as you were?”

My eyes burn when I don’t blink, afraid I’ll miss even a drop of Asher’s humanity.

He leans back in his chair instead, unbothered. “Are you done? Because I’ve got shit to do.”

I’ve cared too much these past couple of days. Years of training myself into a machine, and I still don’t know who I really am underneath. Am I really this destructive when it comes to people I love? I haven’t with Jord, or Punk.

Asher is my damn fucking kryptonite.

With as much *zero fucks given* attitude as I can muster, I walk back through the way I came, landing into a hard chest waiting outside the door.

Atlas looks between me and the asshole behind me. “What happened?”

My chest splits open, allowing a heavy drop of sadness in. “Nothing.”

“Ivy!” Asher calls, and I stop. “Tell Sinead they need to pack.”

CHAPTER TEN

IVY

THIRTY THOUSAND FEET ABOVE NOTHING, and if I fell from it right now it still wouldn't match the constant spiral in my belly every time my eyes catch Asher.

Even now, asleep with his hood pulled low enough to hide his face, he's got my organs on free-fall.

Stupid. Contaminated.

His breathing is in sync with mine. It used to be comforting to fall asleep on his chest, but now all I can think of is the bullet I put there.

I scroll my phone, switching between playlists I'll never actually open, thumb hovering over one titled "For When You Fuck Everything Up."

Seems appropriate.

Outside the window, clouds spread flat. We're somewhere over the Atlantic, heading toward Désamour, toward Nonna, and my stomach knots over how he's going to behave.

Will she get the Asher who took care of me, or the one who looks through me like I'm not even there?

I pull my knees to my chest in the leather seat, and there it is, the faint kickback of my gun. Smell the wet-iron reek of it. See his blood on my hands.

Why the fuck couldn't I remember that I loved him.

Spotify blurs through the burn of my vision, but I fight the tears that threaten to spill.

Asher shifts in his sleep, jaw going tight. Even unconscious he's violence-ready, and that's because of me. I did this. Turned him from prince to villain.

The pilot hits the cabin intercom. "Beginning our descent into Désamour. Twenty minutes to landing."

He peels his eyes open, that blue-white stare on mine across the cabin, and my ribs lock.

Minutes pass, or maybe seconds, then the jolt of landing breaks the stare-down.

Désamour's airstrip runs gray and wet under February drizzle.

Home.

Only, when the word passes through me, I feel nothing.

Daniel and Sinead are already posted at the cars as we slow to a stop.

Why the fuck is he still looking at me like that?

His thumb skims over his lower lip, focus still on me. "You look worried."

I dig my nails into my palms. "I am."

"Well don't be." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "My performance will be almost as good as yours."

My mouth drops open. "Asher."

Swinging a duffle over his shoulder, he stands to his full height. "What? Isn't that what we do now?"

He kicks the door open. "Perform. Play our parts." A rough laugh slips out of him. "Since we're both such good fucking actors."

He gives me no room to answer, already heading out the exit.

My performance will be almost as good as yours.

WE TURN ONTO A DIRT ROAD, and I feel myself slowly relax. Vines wind up the weathered walls, the house rising from the roll of mountains. We stop outside, and Daniel heads straight for the trunk.

I shove my door open.

Gravel crunches under my boots as I step into the old driveway. It's been years since I've been back here, yet it feels like yesterday that I left.

Shivers wrack through me and I run my hands up and down my arms. Colder than I remember, yet warmth still exists here and I'm guessing it has nothing to do with the weather and everything to do with who's inside.

Asher closes his door with a thud and rounds my side, his face completely blank.

Daniel lifts my duffel. "You good?"

"I'll be fine," I say, but my smile falls a second too early.

The front door swings open before we reach it, and Nonna steps out with a bright smile. "Ma petite!"

I walk straight into her arms. "Nonna," I breathe.

She smells of jasmine and silver. Like home.

Her hands cup my cheeks, her hazel eyes softening as she studies me. "You look tired, chérie."

I sigh, squeezing her grip. "I'm fine."

She kisses my forehead, smiling like she knows better. "Liar."

Turning, she looks at the stranger I dragged to her door. "And you must be..."

"Asher." He dips his head, kissing her knuckles with a small smirk. "Enchanté, Madame."

Bastard. I see what he's doing.

She clicks her tongue. "Un vrai gentleman." Waving us toward the hall, she adds, "Come, come inside."

Asher follows her in, his shoulders stiff as he scans the room. The place is old, but Nonna keeps it tidy. Ornate frames with chipped edges cover the walls, and the floors are in desperate need of a fresh coat of varnish.

My stomach grumbles as the smell of braised meat drifts through from the kitchen.

"Ah." Nonna catches my look as Asher moves around the room. "Food will come, but first. Wine."

She steers us to the kitchen, clay pots stacked beneath bundles of dried herbs hung from beams. This has always been Nonna's home base. I wonder why none of us thought to come back here more often.

Nonna stirs the largest pot on the stove. "Asher. Grab us down some glasses."

He flips the first cabinet open and does as he's told, placing them on the counter.

She pops a cork off a bottle of Pinot, eyeing Asher with a smirk. "You're rather impressive on a snowboard, Mr. Jameson. Tell me, is that a family trait?"

He hesitates, and I swirl the liquid around the glass.

“I guess you could say that.” His mouth splits into a wide smile.

All the air leaves my lungs. I hadn’t realized how badly I missed that smile until now.

I swallow a gulp of wine to drown the butterflies in my belly.

He leans forward and locks onto Nonna like she’s the only person in the room. Asher is good at that. At making you feel like you mean something to someone. The thought hollows me out.

More wine.

“You watched me?” Asher blinks, darkness lifting from his shoulders for the first time in... forever.

They must’ve been talking Winter Games while I was off ruining my own life in my head.

Nonna chuckles. “Of course. When Ivy told me who she was...” The corner of her mouth tilts up. “...smitten with. Well. I had to pay very close attention.”

I grip the stem of my glass. “Nonna!”

Nonna pats my cheek, completely unbothered. “What? Now, now. You and I both know that’s the least I could do.”

She’s playing right into Asher’s hands, and he has no idea she’s doing it on purpose.

He laughs, settling against the counter like his body already knows it belongs there.

Nonna winks at him. Fucking winks.

“He makes physics his bitch, Ivanya, that is impressive.”

I scrub a hand over my face and try not to smile. “Jesus, Nonna.”

She refills our glasses and turns back to Asher. “Tell me about the switch method. I don’t understand how you generate that rotation.”

He plants one palm on the counter and breaks down edge control and weight distribution. When his arm stretches over my chair, I freeze, the hairs along my neck lifting.

Nonna asks smart questions, cutting straight to the parts that matter. He meets her there, voice steady, hands moving, the stiffness in him loosening with every answer.

This is who he was, who he could have stayed if I hadn’t fucked him.

Nonna taps my wrist with a spoon and drags me back. “Ivy? Show Asher to your room, ma petite. You both need rest before dinner.”

He nods toward the stairs. “Lead the way, Venom.”

I step onto the narrow staircase with his heat at my back as I direct us up to my childhood bedroom.

It's like walking through time. Pink and teal paint is chipped over the walls from where I'd rip down old posters I outgrew, leaving only the pressed flowers hanging in frames. They were my constant reminder to care for things after they die.

My feet carry me to the wooden bench seat below the large window.

Random quotes from the Codex are carved into the wood. Mainly the ones I struggled to learn.

The body keeps score of violence. Learn its language before you speak it.

Memories flash through my head.

Jord quizzing me and throwing chocolate in my mouth every time I got it right.

Leon teaching me how to break someone without touching them. He'd stay patient, making me do it again until my eyes stopped giving me away.

Asher sets down the bags and takes in the room, his fingers dragging over the photos tucked into my mirror. Jord and me at sixteen. Luce and me shooting. Leon and Punk laughing at something dumb.

Neither of us speaks.

"Funny." I drag my thumb over the grooves carved into my bedpost. "The thought of ever bringing a boy into this room never crossed my mind."

He glances over, brows lifted slightly. His jaw loosens as he starts to speak, then he clamps his mouth shut.

I keep moving, letting the room settle my head.

Tracing the edge of the picture frame, I whisper, "Nonna saved me. After..."

The words fade in my mouth.

I turn to meet his stare. "Asher."

He steps past me, reaching for the door. "Don't."

He stops with his hand on the frame. "I need to shower before dinner." Keeping his back to me, he lifts his chin. "She's exactly what I pictured, by the way. When you talked about her."

Then he's gone.

I stare at the empty space and the ground shifts under my feet. I know how we got to this point, but it doesn't make it sting any less.

The old pipes groan when he finally turns on the shower.

Focus. *Stay focused*. I need to distract myself with something before I go in there and make him hate fuck me until he forgives me, so I start unpacking.

By the time I make it downstairs, Nonna is at full speed. Pots clatter, garlic and rosemary thickening the air.

She points a wooden spoon at the cutting board without looking up. “Chop.”

Reaching for the knife, I chop without rhythm.

Her hip bumps mine as she grabs the olive oil. “Tu es impossible.”

I let the French come easy, nudging her back with my elbow. “Non, tu es impossible.”

Switching to English, she grabs carrots. “You were such a pain in the ass growing up.” She side-eyes me. “Every new member that walked through that door, you refused to listen to their introductions. Even if it came from me. You would say ‘*I don’t believe words, I believe silence, because silence doesn’t care who is listening.*’”

I snort and drag the peeler along a potato. “I still believe that.”

“Oh, I know.” Pride warms her face as she drops the carrots into the pot, but her smile slips a little. “I *definitely* know that.”

Asher leans against the doorframe at the edge of my vision, watching me.

I suck in a breath.

Before I can speak, he straightens and vanishes, taking his cold stare with him.

Blood gushes behind my ears, drowning out Nonna’s voice.

Her hand covers mine. “Where did you go?”

“Nowhere.” I shake myself out of my own pity. “I’m here, but I have a question.”

Neither of us stops. Just two carefully built machines, designed to lie and kill.

“Did you know?” I flick a stray potato skin off my hand into the pile. I don’t need to elaborate. She knows.

“What do you think?” She wipes her hands on her apron, pausing to look at me.

I tighten my grip on the knife. “I think—”

The front door crashes open, Jord shoving his glasses up over his head. “We’re hommmeee! Chaos has arrived!”
As always, perfect timing.

MISMATCHED plates crowd the table as candles drip wax down their stems.

Luce swirls her wine across from me, laughing, and my chest eases for a moment.

I spent the rest of the day doing anything that kept my hands busy and my eyes off Asher. It was all very mature. An excellent display of my healing journey. Truly.

I told myself I wasn’t avoiding him.

I’ve always been better at lying to myself than to him.

Asher pulls out the chair beside me, replacing all the oxygen in the room as he lowers himself into it without breaking conversation with Jord.

His sleeve drags across my arm when he reaches for his glass, and my pulse forgets every useful thing it’s ever done.

My thighs lock when his wrist passes mine, close enough that his cologne and clean skin cut through the garlic and wine and candle smoke, blood running hot behind my eyes.

I’m fine.

Everything is fine.

I’m absolutely *not* measuring the distance between his throat and Nonna’s good fork.

Then he chuckles against the side of my neck, those almost-white blue eyes angled toward me for half a second too long.

He fucking knows what he’s doing. The man knows every curve of my body like he was the one who built it.

Jord throws his hands wide, almost leveling the salt. “No, no, no,” he says, face lit up. “She didn’t just hack into it. She lived in it for three days before anyone noticed.”

Punk jabs her fork at him, teal hair swinging. “It was a municipal server, Jord. Municipal. Stop making it sound like I breached the Pentagon.”

Jord leans forward like he’s a damn defense lawyer. “You were fourteen!”

Punk rolls her eyes. “And it was a parking violations database. I was trying to get Nonna’s ticket dismissed.”

Nonna raises her glass from the head of the table and tips it toward Punk. "And you did."

Laughter rolls through the room and I let it pull the tension off my shoulders, shaking my head at the memories of little Punk.

Asher shifts, the warm weight of his thigh sliding against mine.

I stop breathing.

He doesn't move, just stays there with deliberate pressure.

Asshole.

I reach for my glass, fingers a fraction too tight around the stem.

Nonna aims her fork at me. "Tell them about the time Ivy climbed onto the roof. Sixteen years old, middle of winter."

I sink back into my chair, angling into Asher without thinking. "No, truly, we don't have to do that."

She ignores me. "She wanted to see the stars better. So she takes a bottle of my good wine and a blanket and climbs out her window at two in the morning."

His hand slips from the table and lands on my thigh. I clear my throat, heat traveling with his palm as it slides inward.

"I fell asleep and woke up covered in snow," I say, doing my best to not sound breathy.

Nonna laughs into her napkin. "I found her at dawn. Blue lips, hypothermia setting in, still clutching that empty bottle."

I fix my eyes on Luce. "Worth it though. The stars were perfect."

Asher hides a grin behind his glass, gaze flicking to me. "Yeah, Ivy and stars seem vaguely familiar." He leans in like we're the only people in this room. "Right, Venom?"

I don't pull away. "It was also my birthday, so..."

The mask slips for a moment.

I face forward, scanning until I find Daniel at the far end of the table. His eyes meet mine with a small dip of his chin.

Sinead lounges in their chair, tattooed arms folded, smirking at something Jord says. Typical Jord. Of course it would be him that tugs at the hard edges of Sinead.

Sinead shakes their head, amused. "You're all fucking disasters. How are you still alive?"

I lift a shoulder and reach for the bread. "Spite."

Luce raises her glass, mouth tugging. "And Nonna."

Asher spreads his fingers and draws my thigh closer to his, and my body refuses to settle the fuck down, which only makes me hate him more on sheer principle.

My knee brushes his, tilting the room.

He traces circles over my skin, each one making me burn hotter and hotter.

I swallow my wine in one gulp, ignoring Luce's obvious gawking from across the table. She's always had the mercy of an executioner when I'm making bad choices.

Asher brings his mouth to my ear. "You're getting quiet, Venom."

I set my glass down before I do something idiotic with it. "I'm considering murder."

He turns closer, his mouth ghosting against my skin. "Foreplay already?"

Across the table, Luce gives me a sweet little smile over her wine, and I know she's saving this for later. The traitor.

Punk leans into the table, attention on Asher. "Tell him about the time Ivy tried to cook for Leon's birthday."

I lift an eyebrow. "We don't talk about that."

Jord toys with a crust and smirks. "The fire department came."

Luce covers a grin with her hand. "Twice."

Asher tilts his head and nudges my shoulder. "Now that I believe." He shifts closer. "I was always the one cooking."

I turn into him before I register how close our faces are. "If by cooking you mean cheating and ordering takeout, then suuureee."

His gaze drops to my mouth, and there it is, that old, lazy grin. The one that used to knock all the fight out of me and apparently still can, because the whole world falls away in an instant.

My heartbeat thuds against my ribs as he drains his glass and slides in close, but I stop him with a hand on his chest. "Stop doing that."

Asher grins. "Doing what, Venom?"

I glare at him, because if he keeps putting his body this close, I'm going to fucking climb it.

Threading his fingers into the back of my hair, he angles his head to the side and kisses me, tongue sliding past my lips.

And there goes my dignity. Out the window. Gone. Because his mouth is doing that thing it used to do, the thing I love to pretend I *don't* miss.

My body answers before my brain can stop it, fingers curling into his collar and dragging him closer, like I have any right to, like I didn't spend a year thinking I'd killed him.

He pulls back a fraction, breath warm against my mouth, that fucking grin pressed to my lips.

Everything snaps back into focus. I used to have more control. *I do have more control.* What the fuck is wrong with me where this man is concerned?

Luce mouths something across the table, catching my eye. "You okay?"

Not a single person here so much as blinks at mine and Asher's little display of... whatever the fuck that was. Despite the erratic beating of my thirsty heart, I nod at Luce.

I can't tell anymore if he's forgiving me or punishing me.

Sound cracks half a second behind the impact, and the delay jerks my head sideways. Wood and glass spray across my cheek, and I'm already moving, dropping beneath the table to yank the strapped gun from where it's kept for... purposes.

Another shot rips through the room. *To find a vantage point, you must calculate the trajectory in reverse and then work out if you're dealing with a single shooter or pair.* The rhythm between rounds is uneven and spaced far apart, which means one shooter.

Standing to my full height, I lift my arm to unload when Asher clamps his around my throat, dragging me behind him as his other hand strips the gun from me so fast my fingers still curl like they're holding it.

He fucking disarmed me faster than I could recite the damn Codex. Positioning himself between me and the shattered window, he locks onto the invisible target and fires once.

Twice.

Three times.

Silence.

Screams tear through the room, drowned in white noise.

Luce... it's Luce screaming.

Asher stands motionless as his arm pins me behind him. No tremble in his frame, no frantic shifts of a man unfamiliar with the weight of a weapon.

Saliva burns down my throat, the room tilting under dust and adrenaline. This is a man built for violence, not sport.

He turns back over his shoulder, eyes dropping to me. Pupils darker, jaw locked, and veins roped along his forearms.

He isn't scared.

My mouth opens but nothing comes out.

Luce screams through the ringing in my ears again. "Ivy! Nonna's hurt!"

Shoving toward the head of the table, I feel his arm slip away, his fingers dragging against mine for a single second before letting go.

My knees hit the floor as soon as I reach her and I don't think, don't fucking process a single thing but *save her*.

I press my palm to her torso and gasp, blood spilling between my fingers the same way Asher's did.

I blink.

This is different. *This is too much.*

Darkness closes in, the room shrinking to a black-rimmed tunnel. *Control the scene. Lower your own breathing before you touch the wound, because panic is transmissible and bodies copy each other faster than language.*

"Stay with me." I press harder into her soft belly. "Nonna, look at me. Look at me."

Blood spreads across the floor.

"Nonna?" Knives scrape down my throat when I swallow.

Her weak fingers find mine, still warm. "Ma petite..."

"Shhh." I cradle her head, blood sticking her hair to my fingers. "Don't talk. Save your strength."

She gasps, pulling me down by the back of my neck until her lips touch my ear. She forces the words through the blood pooling in her throat and I catch every syllable.

"Le Boucher will take care of you Ivy. He always has, he's the only one you can trust." The words fumble through the blood pooling in her throat, but I catch every syllable. Of course I trust Emeric.

My mouth opens to answer, but she goes stiff in my hands.

No!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IVY

GONE.

Blood drips from Leon and onto the blue-patterned tiles Nonna picked out when she renovated the kitchen, or tried to. It was the first time I realized we couldn't hire *people* people for maintenance because it would run too high a risk.

This was our safe space, and Nonna made sure we always knew it.

Get up. Do something.

Jord hits the floor beside Leon, a sound scraping out of him I've never heard before. It drags straight down my nerves.

Reaching for Nonna with a hand that won't steady, his fingers freeze an inch from her sleeve. They snap back to his chest. If he touches her, it becomes real.

I can't focus on anything. Nothing but Nonna.

Nonna's lips part but her chest stays still. I glide my fingers over her cheek, dragging crimson over soft brown skin.

This isn't happening. *This cannot be happening.*

"No." Blood continues to spread beneath her head. I can't fix this. I —"no, no, no."

Get up. Do something.

I'm frozen in place, watching the world I knew drain away.

Leon's voice cuts through the ringing in my ears. "Ivy."

I shake my head. "Do something. You know medicine, you've—"

"Ivy." His hand catches my wrist, grip tight. "She's gone."

My stomach caves, heat and bile clawing up my throat. I want to scream, want to break Leon's jaw for saying it, want to rip thirty minutes apart and drag Nonna from that table before the first bullet blew through the window.

Instead I sink back on my heels, blood dripping from my fingertips onto my lap.

"Ivanya." Daniel watches me from the other side of the room, hands loose at his sides, just as Asher strolls past the shattered window like he's bulletproof.

They'll never find them.

I know this like I know the weight of a Desert Eagle in my hand. Like I know the exact angle to sever a femoral artery. Like I know the sound a body makes when it hits concrete from ten stories up.

Whoever did this is already gone.

Punk drags in a breath. "She was laughing. Five minutes ago she was laughing."

My throat closes.

Death used to be a simple thing, until it landed on our doorstep.

Luce opens her eyes but doesn't look at Nonna. She looks at me, hazel gaze steady. "You know what we need to do."

"No." It rips out of me. "We don't touch her. We don't—"

"Ivy." Leon crouches closer, palms open between us. "You know this was him. Le Boucher—"

"Emeric wouldn't do this!" I stand on unsteady legs. "If—if he wanted her dead, he would have—she said—"

Jord surges to his feet, chest heaving. "You make too many excuses for that monster. Fuck, Ivy! That codex is fucking rooted inside of you like a bad weed!"

"Stop." Punk flinches at her own sharpness, shoulders pulling in. "Nonna wouldn't want us fighting and Luce is right. We need to recalibrate."

They know. We all know. This wasn't random. This was a message.

Leon drags his hands down his jeans, leaving scarlet streaks across black denim. "Then you need to call Emeric. Before he finds out through other channels, because if this was an ordered hit, he'd know."

Footsteps hit the porch.

Asher fills the doorway, rain darkening his hair. Scanning the room, those pale blue eyes find Nonna first before they lock on me.

His face changes, the last scrap of ease going cold, and I swear the air in the room turns thin.

“Gone.” His jaw sets on the word. “Whoever it was is gone.”

Dropping into a crouch beside me, glass crunches under his boot.

His hand closes around the back of my neck, locking me in place. “We’ll find them.”

That’s a promise in the only language I understand. Violence.

WATER POUNDS MY SHOULDERS, shifting from pink to red to clear as I scrub Nonna’s blood from my skin. With every pass of my hands I shudder, the world tilting as her final words cycle on repeat.

“Le Boucher will take care of you Ivy. He always has, he’s the only one you can trust—”

It’s nothing new. I *know* he takes care of me, I *know* he’s built these systems for our own good. The rest of the family don’t get it. Can’t see past the monster to find the man.

My forehead hits the tile as water continues pelt against my shoulders.

I should call him. I need to.

The bathroom door opens. I don’t need to look to know who owns those footsteps. They’ve always been weighted and deliberate. Back then I chalked it up to athleticism.

Now I’m wondering if I had it wrong from the start.

“Venom...” His hand flattens against the shower glass.

I don’t answer.

The door slides open, and he stands there a beat, jaw locked so hard the muscle jumps. His eyes drag over me, stopping on my face, and whatever anger he’s been carrying cracks open.

His hand flexes against the glass.

Whatever internal battle he’s fighting flashes over his face before he gives in with a deep exhale and steps under the water fully dressed, shrinking the space around us.

Two fingers slip beneath my chin, tipping my face toward him. Water runs from his dark lashes, tracing the hard line of his cheek.

I jerk free. “I’m fine.”

His face softens. “You’re bleeding.”

I look down, finding my knuckles torn open against the tile. When did that happen? I can't remember. Blood stains the water around my feet, and my knees give way.

Asher catches me before I drop, fingers digging into my ribs as he hauls me up.

I want to fight him off. Want to claw at his chest for being here, for watching me break apart.

Arms slide under my thighs as he scoops me up, and we're out of the shower before I can process, his foot kicking the faucet off on the way.

He sets me on the bed like I'm fragile, and I almost laugh because these hands he's so worried about have ended more people than he can count.

"Tell me..." His knuckle drags slow along my jaw. "What did she say?"

Find the lawless butcher that terrifies most people but took care of us.

My throat closes around the truth. "She said goodbye."

Asher slowly blinks. He knows I'm lying but can't call me on it.

I should look away, maintain the make-believe boundary we both pretend exists, but then I remember what it felt like to not have him. His absence isn't something I can handle right now, despite whatever hatred he has toward me.

Moving to his luggage, he grabs one of his shirts. "Arms."

I obey without thinking as he tugs it over my head like I'm five years old, before pulling back the covers.

His brow lifts. "In."

I push up onto my elbows. "I'm not—"

He glares. "Get in the fucking bed, Ivy."

I slide between the sheets, curling into myself, knees drawn tight.

Don't cry. Don't you dare.

Asher climbs in and hauls me back against his chest. His arm locks across my ribs before I can even think to protest.

"What happens now?" His mouth moves against the back of my neck. "With Nonna."

I sniffle, the fight draining out of my body. "There's protocol."

"Protocol." His tone goes flat. I know it's because he's trying to make sense of my choice of words.

"Yeah." I stare into the dark. "And it's absolute." Pause. "Even if we don't want to..."

He doesn't move, but his thumb circles my arm. "Wanna explain?"

My spine goes rigid. "I can't."

Not won't. Can't. The Codex doesn't allow it. Emeric's rules, and they're carved into my back. Literally.

His arm tightens around me. "Ivy—"

"Please." My throat works around it. "Just... not tonight."

He's quiet for a long moment. Then his grip tightens, pulling me closer. "Okay."

I wait for more questions, more demands. They don't come. Just his steady breathing, his heartbeat against my spine, the weight of his arm holding me while everything else falls apart.

His breathing evens out first. Sleep taking him in increments.

I count to three hundred. Then three hundred more.

When I'm certain he's under, I slide out from beneath his arm.

He shifts but doesn't wake.

I change quickly, black pants, black thermal, boots that don't make sound. My hair gets twisted into a knot at the base of my skull. The Desert Eagle slips into its holster at my hip.

When I duck out into the dark hallway, I know which floorboards creak, and which ones stay silent as I guide myself down the stairs, through the kitchen, and towards the back room where we always gathered for the things that couldn't be said in daylight.

Jord's already leaning against the wall, arms crossed, face red from crying, and Luce sits on the old trunk, hands folded in her lap.

Punk shifts from the windowsill, teal hair catching where the moonlight spills in near Leon, who's guarding the door.

Daniel's eyes land on me, features softening even as the rest of him stays locked and ready for a fight.

"Took you long enough." Jord drags the back of his hand across his eyes. "Are goodbyes harder when you can't just shoot him?"

"Shut up!" My jaw clenches, but the anger drains out of me instantly and my frown drops.

I don't snap. I don't argue. Especially not with them.

Jord's eyes glass over, but he stays quiet because he knows the same thing I do. There's nothing worth fighting over.

Daniel steps forward from the shadows, hands loose and ready at his sides. "We have to remember protocol."

He dangles a set of keys from his jacket, placing them on the table. "There's a car waiting through the clearing on the other side of the cellar. Black sedan."

Luce lifts her chin, doing her best to mask the pain. "Route?"

"Punk drives." Daniel's eyes find Punk on the windowsill. "Straight to the airstrip. No stops, no detours, no *nothing* until you're wheels up."

She slides off the sill, catching the keys Daniel tosses without looking. Her fingers close around them. "And you?"

"I stay." Daniel's gaze sweeps the room, landing on each of us in turn. "I'll handle the house and await contact."

Handle the house means handle Nonna. Means clean the blood off tiles. Means erase every trace of what happened here tonight so that when the sun comes up, this place looks like nothing more than a neglected Château. Means ensuring Nonna is buried with her family.

Means this is it.

My stomach drops.

"Let's move." I push off the table, heading for the cellar door.

Jord grabs a bag from behind the trunk, and Luce rises without a sound. Leon falls into step beside me, close enough that his shoulder brushes mine.

Punk pushes through the heavy door at the far end of the cellar, and we all file out through the back door.

I pause when I reach the edge of trees, turning to take one last look at the house. Yellow light spills from the kitchen window where Nonna taught me to make her grandmother's cassoulet. Where she bandaged my split knuckles after Emeric's training sessions left me bleeding out with a bruised ego. Where she held me the night I came back from my first kill and couldn't stop shaking.

Luce touches my elbow. "We have to move."

I nod, swallowing the questions and launching forward.

We cut through the first scatter of trees, nearing the old well shaped by stone.

Fresh blood glistens at its base, and I slow to a walk, following the trail. Too much to be from an animal, wrong color for deer. Drag marks lead from the pool into the undergrowth, heading east.

Away from the house.

My pulse picks up.

Asher was outside for twenty minutes after the shooting, checking the perimeter with Sinead and Daniel.

He said they were gone. If he killed him himself, why lie?

“Ivy?” Leon stops on the trail ahead, half-turning back to me. “You coming?”

I step over the blood. “Yeah.”

Punk’s already visible near the clearing where headlights cut through the dark. If I mentioned what I found, how would it play out with everyone right now?

Luce would want to investigate. Pull samples, run analysis, build a timeline that would eat up hours we don’t have. Leon would insist we confront Asher directly. Punk would spiral into theories, each one darker than the last, connecting dots that may not exist until the paranoia triggers her back onto her meds.

And Jord... Jord is barely holding himself together. One more fracture and he breaks in a way *none* of us can fix.

I tell them nothing.

Asher lied to my face. Looked me in the eyes, held me in the shower, put me to bed, and lied.

How does it feel?

What happened during those twenty minutes? Did he kill the sniper? Interrogate them? Let them go? Every single question that’s left unanswered winds me tighter and tighter.

We all file into the warmth of the car, Punk taking the driver’s seat. Once we’re all in, she directs us out onto the dark road ahead.

No one talks. Silence weighs heavy on all of our shoulders, but it’s not until the adrenaline of the night wears off that everything will feel real.

We do not run. We do not hide. But if you find yourself targeted, proceed with protocol. Don’t stay where the message was delivered. Do not grieve. Grief is a contaminant. Treat it accordingly.

The Codex can go fuck itself.

Punk clears her throat, eyes fixed on the road. “Airstrip in fifteen.”

I stare out my window at the blur of trees, thinking about Asher’s hands on my skin, the shower, the weight of me against his chest. Then his voice loops back. “*Gone.*”

Every muscle locks, mental walls slamming down between the memories and my stupidity.

Leon shifts beside me, dipping his head close to mine. “When we land, we stick to the safehouse schedule.” If he thinks I can’t feel his focus on me, he’s fucking deluded.

I swallow. “I’ll come to check the safehouse.”

His brows pinch. “Ivy...”

I keep my gaze forward. “Then I’ll go back to Asher.”

Punk’s grip jerks, the car sways, she corrects, then shoots me a look in the rearview. “What do you mean?”

Jord chokes on a laugh from the back seat. He leans forward, elbows digging into his knees. “You finally snap and choose suicide as a hobby? That’s fun.”

Luce turns her head slightly, studying me from the passenger seat, face giving nothing away. *You really are my best fucking friend.*

Leon’s hand lands on my forearm, interrupting my thoughts. “You’re in shock.”

I stare at where his fingers press into my skin. Those hands have dug bullets out of me, held my hair back while I puked up poison, wrapped around my throat so I’d learn the difference between panic and actual oxygen loss. They’ve been an anchor for as long as I can remember, but right now the weight is dragging me straight to the bottom.

I peel his fingers away. “I’m thinking clearly.”

He keeps his face blank. “We just lost Nonna to an unknown shooter. We follow protocol.”

Anger spreads through me, but I ball my fists at my sides to keep from exposing them. “Protocol makes us predictable.”

Punk’s breathing kicks up. “Okay, cool, so what. We abandon everything and go full vigilante?”

Jord barks a laugh. “We already are, nerd.”

“Say what you mean, Ivy.” Luce keeps her eyes on me, hands still in her lap.

I blink, gathering my words. “I’m not running from Asher. If I go down, it happens because I stayed. It happens because I chose it. I’m not dying with my back turned, sprinting into some hole our enemies picked for us.”

Leon’s face tightens. “Spell out the real reasons you’re going back to him, Vanya.”

My mouth opens.

He glares. “And remember I know how you lie because I was the motherfucker you trained on.”

I hadn’t planned to lie anyway, but the words spill out unfiltered. “I just said why. I’m not a runner, Leon. You know this. I charge head first into things most would run from.”

Punk swallows hard, eyes flicking between the road and the mirror. “Is that it?”

I don’t answer. I said what I said and they can take it for what it is, or not.

Leon leans in again, slower this time. “Are you saying you’re choosing Asher? Over L’Abattoir?”

My fingers flex in my palm. “I’m saying I’m finishing something I started. Emeric would—”

Jord leans back, dragging a hand down his face, cutting me off. “Nonna’s dead and you’re still thinking about him.”

My stomach flips. “She *wants* this. She would always want this.”

Luce shifts, her hand brushing Jord’s knee once, a grounding touch. She looks at me again. “So what do you propose we do.”

I press my tongue to the top of my mouth. *Psychological warfare. Corps de violence. Advanced manipulation. Emergency Protocols for Emotional Contamination.*

Emeric’s voice slithers through the wires of my brain. *Control, Ivanya. Control the narrative, control the room, control yourself.*

I breathe in through my nose. “We secure the safehouse and make sure it’s clean. No tails. No cameras. No trackers. We set up Punk, and then I go back.”

“No.” Leon’s hand cuts flat through the air between us.

For years, Leon has been the one person whose opinion can move me. One sentence from him and I bend, adjust, obey, because he earned it.

Tonight, he’s just a person.

“Anyone who wants to come can.” I hold my spine straight against the seat, hands open on my knees. “And those who don’t—” I pause, letting him have the whole weight of my words. “—don’t.”

Hurt flashes over his face, but he’s too fast, forcing himself to hide it. He fails. I see it anyway, because he trained on me the same way I did on him.

Punk whistles low. “And what if Emeric says he doesn’t want you to continue this mission?”

I pause.

She pushes on. “Would you go against the very man you swear by?”

“I would tell him there’s too much left to uncover.” My lips curl beneath my teeth. “I would.”

I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince more. Them or me.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

IVY

I STARE DOWN at my phone, rereading my last five texts, all left on read. Emeric hasn't returned a single one.

Not even when I signaled that Nonna was gone.

Pick up the fucking phone.

I type it out. Delete it. Type it again.

My thumb hovers over send when the car door flies open.

Atlas stands to the side, sweat damp on his skin. No doubt shirtless and post work-out.

I don't look away from my phone. "Do you ever wear clothes?"

Closing out the text box, I finally turn to him. There it is. Gray sweats that hang off a six pack I'd seen far too often.

His mouth tilts at the corner. "Aw, don't act like you don't love it." He dips into the car to Daniel. "Thanks for bringing her home safe."

Home.

I scoff, shuffling out of the back seat when he steps aside.

"First of all, Daniel has always kept me safe, so watch your tone." I circle the space between us. "Second, this is not my home, and third, you're lucky I stick to things I commit to."

Afternoon sun hits my face, and I shade it with my hand, peering up at Atlas when he doesn't answer. "What?"

He searches my eyes as if battling with what to say. "There's a cockroach in the house."

Camille.

I sigh, leaning against the car to catch my breath.

Of course. Because of course, Asher thinks like other men his age and assumes the one way to get back at me for leaving him in Désamour is with his ex.

Atlas shuts the back door and hauls my luggage out of the trunk before dragging it up the steps.

He stops when he realizes I'm not following, flashing a grin over his shoulder. "Oh, come on. I know you like to squash roaches."

I genuinely hate this man. He reminds me of everything I'll never have again with Asher.

Atlas draws in close, until his chest brushes mine. "Just play the game, Ivanya."

Daniel's stare burns into my back.

I glance over my shoulder and catch him watching Atlas, jaw tight. We've never talked about his history with Emeric. Never needed to. I trust him with my life. More than that. But something's off with him lately. Or maybe I'm just paranoid, drowning in the theatrics of it all.

Atlas extends his hand. "You ready?"

Daniel nods at me, his smile thin, before climbing back into the car.

I take Atlas's hand and let him lead me up the steps and through the front door.

Chatter drifts from the main living area, tucked behind the floating wall that separates the foyer.

I set my handbag on a side table, catching my reflection in the mirror above it. My hair's longer than last year, tangling easily at the ends, and my skin darker than the last time I saw him, since the new "safehouse" is more of a "beach shack".

Thirty-one years and I can't claim a single thing that matters.

No kids. No career worth mentioning, no husband waiting at home with dinner on the table. My life has never been simple. But during jobs, I pretend it is. That's why I love what I do. I get to slip into someone else's skin. The neighbor, the crazy ex, the housewife, the boss. The wife.

I've lived a thousand lives, and not a single one of them is real.

A strapless top clings tight around my waist, dipping between my breasts, and vintage Levi's hang loose on my hips, a sliver of skin exposed where the denim rolls at my ankles.

I'm dressed for Cuba, not Veilarath.

I slip off my Hermes flats and use my fingers to break through the waves in my hair, shifting it all to one side as I follow Atlas into the living room.

Well. One life is for real. This one. So far...

I stop at the threshold when the room pulls tight around me, everyone in it turning.

His eyes land on me and with one slow sweep, he devours my body inch by inch before settling back on my lips.

Camille drags her thumb along one perfect nail, her mouth pinching at the sight of me. "Ah, she's back... yay."

"You must be Ivanya." A voice cuts through the quiet, and I pivot, finding a woman with dark hair and familiar, piercing blue eyes.

She smiles, her expression warm and open. "Oh, honey, don't be shy. Come."

She wraps her arms around me and I freeze.

Atlas's hand lands on my back, rubbing a slow circle. "It'll be over faster if you just ride it out, V."

Since when did he decide to cut my damn name?

The tension drops from my shoulders as she gives me a soft pat before sitting back on her heels. "I'm the boys' mom, Elea. Come, sit."

Their mother? No one's ever mentioned a mother. Not online, not on record.

"She likes a private life," Asher murmurs from the corner, as if reading my mind. I wouldn't be surprised if he could at this point.

I settle into the sofa as Elea glides in from the kitchen, a tray balanced in her grip.

"I thought you could use a drink." She halts in front of me, her expression warm. "Asher told me about your Nonna."

She sets the tray on the table, lifting two martini glasses. The edges of her eyes soften as she reaches up, threading a finger gently through my hair. "So beautiful."

I smile. "Thank you."

Goddammit, Asher. He could have filled me in on what I'm doing here. I'm always playing house, but this is the first time I don't know the script.

Gin spreads a slow heat through my chest, releasing all the tension I'd been holding.

“Your sister wants to start planning her birthday party earlier this year.” She stirs the liquid in her glass.

Atlas moves to the spot on the other side of me, and I fight the urge to ask him what the fuck he’s doing. “She’s a brat, that’s why.”

Elea turns her attention to her son. “You are in no place to be grading your sister for her bratty antics, since she most certainly learned them from you.”

I cough, swiping the gin from my lip.

Sister... that’s right. I almost forgot they had one.

“Aw, what’s the matter?” Camille purrs from beside Asher, her eyes on mine. Not sure they’ve left since I walked in here. “Cat got your tongue?”

I don’t have the energy or the brain cells to respond, but my mouth opens to reply anyway. “I wouldn’t call him a cat, no...”

Elea rests her hand on my knee, and some of the static under my skin eases.

Who are these people. What the hell is happening...

I stand quickly, setting my glass on the coffee table and dip straight through whatever weird little family tribunal they have going.

“Sorry.” I force my best smile, gesturing down the hall. “I’ll be a minute.”

I move at a pace that would make any suspicious person, very suspicious, past the hall and under the stairs until I find the bathroom, slipping inside, and locking the door behind me.

It’s small enough to gather my thoughts, but the designs are the same as everywhere else in this house. Concrete and hard.

Shutting my eyes, I grip the counter. One glance at my own face in the mirror and I’ll either laugh or scream. Neither option seems ideal given the situation unfolding in the other room.

I breathe in, and out. Apparently we’re doing breathing exercises now. Love that for me. One ambient Spotify playlist away from a nervous system reset.

One. Two. Three.

Nonna’s blood, Luce’s screams, the body being dragged...

By seven my pulse is still trying to claw out through my throat. By nine I already know ten won’t fix anything, and I’ll need an entirely different number system and possibly an exorcist.

Pull it together.

Asher.

What do I remember about him, and what do I know now? Memories are muddled. Most of them my own doing, since I forced them behind a brick wall after I thought I killed him.

I type out a new message to Luce.

Do you know anyone else like us? Families I mean?

It's far-fetched. Not something we've ever spoken of, Nonna included, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't the first time that it crossed my mind.

There isn't. There are other corporations, sure, but none that fall under the same umbrella of a Playhouse. Why?

Another text comes through.

Even if that were the case, it's impossible. Both live entirely too much in the spotlight to have any anonymity, and we all know that's the only non-negotiable. Also... we know every other Family there is.

I shove my phone back into my pocket.

She's right. I'm reaching.

A door opens and I roll my eyes, already bracing for Atlas, but the silhouette that fills the frame turns my blood hot.

Asher shuts the door behind himself, his gaze locking onto me.

He looks hot. Too fucking hot. Every second around him is a war I'll never win.

"Not really up for the fight." I pretend to fix my lipstick. Now that he's in front of me, I can't form the words I wanted to say. "Maybe go fight with Camille, since she's always around."

His hand lands on my throat, but I slap it away before he's gripped it and swing with my right. He catches my fist faster than I expect, trapping it without effort.

I'm a better fighter than most, even Leon on a good day. There's no way some rich snowboarder can block and hold. Yet another thing about him that doesn't add up.

He uses my captured fist to tug me closer as his other hand finds my throat. The corner of his mouth curls as he glares down at me, and any other woman would wilt under the force of that stare, but I know better.

Even more? I know him.

I whisper the first thing that comes to mind. "I should have killed you."

Shadows darken under his features. "Then do it now."

His focus drops to my lips as his fingers find the side of my face.

I try to twist free, but he tightens his hold, wrenching my face back to his. A single grip around my chin shouldn't hold this much force, and for the second time since arriving, I question exactly who I'm dealing with.

Our closeness lights up every nerve, and I don't know whether it's the poison of being this close to one another or because we both react better to violence, but every second feels longer than the last.

"You left me, at that house, to, what, Venom? Go where?" His thigh brushes my inner one. "And if you even think of slipping out from me right now, I'll bend you over and fuck you how I should kill you."

Heat flares through me.

Stop thinking this is attractive.

I lift a challenging brow. "And what position is that, exactly?"

His thumb presses against my racing pulse, slowly tracing my cheekbone until my nails curl into my palms.

He leans closer. "The kind you don't come back from." He shoves me against the basin. "You're a fucking liar, Venom."

"Which lie are we talking about?" I narrow my eyes, flames flickering beneath my collar. "Because if I remember right, we already settled that bill."

He stays where he is, his body angled toward mine.

I need to be careful with my next words.

"I never lied about everything." My chin lifts, throat exposed and I'm fucking stupid for it. "You know who I am, Asher, but you don't know what I do."

Stepping forward, I hold his stare, the gap between us thinning with each inch. "Why haven't you asked why I did it?"

My voice drops. "You came to La Journée du..."

His palm slams over my mouth before I finish, his arm rigid.

He is *not* about to silence me.

I whack him out of the way, squaring my shoulders. "You never asked why Parker? Why he was a job that took so long to complete? Or how about this? How did *you* know him?"

Nothing I say shocks him as he keeps his expression flat.

“Jesus,” I whisper, mourning the boy I once knew. The one who laughed. The one who broke through every foundation I ever had and set up there like he was the architect of my soul.

He blinks. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I snap, annoyed at everything.

Jesus Christ he’s perfection. That mouth should be illegal. Dark lashes throw shadows over eyes like cracked ice, and those cheekbones...

His tongue swipes his lower lip. “Like you don’t enjoy how it feels to be fucking hunted for once.”

My skin prickles.

He doesn’t stop. “Like you didn’t want me to chase you all the way to that cute little safehouse in the Cayos.”

Every argument we’ve hurled at each other, every bitter word, every accusation. It all collapses into this single moment, and I hate him.

I want to destroy him.

I want to crawl inside his skin and never leave.

He tilts his head. “Come here.”

The ground drops from under me. Two words and I’m done for.

I don’t move, so he threads his fingers through mine.

Warmth floods through me, all the way down to my toes.

I should push him off, push all of this away, but guilt keeps me locked in place.

Brushing my hair back, he cups my chin and lifts my face to his. Then his mouth crashes onto mine.

His tongue traces the seam of my lips and I open for him without thinking. He tastes like rage and want and every *fucking* thing. The kiss deepens until everything else goes quiet, until my fingers claw at his shirt just to stay upright.

He buries his hand in my hair, fisting it tight enough to make my eyes water. Wrenching my head back with a tug, he tears himself away, both of us gasping, his forehead dropping against mine.

“Fuck.” He drags his teeth across my bottom lip, the gesture so gentle I gasp. Whatever words he’s searching for scatter between us.

Dazed and drunk, the room spins around me. “What are you doing?”

“I need you to pay attention to my next words.” His lips skim mine, soft, familiar... *mine*. Shit. No, not mine. He lied. *He dragged someone away...*

“And if I tell you to go fuck yourself?” I pant, my mouth still burning with the aftertaste of him.

His grip tightens, holding me in place. “Then I’d tell you to come do it yourself.”

My complaints die when the hard ridge of his cock swells against me.

I drag my bottom lip into my mouth. “I’m better at fucking you than I am at shooting you, clearly.”

Something flickers across his face before he clears his thoughts. “You need to follow my lead.”

Everything in me pulls taut. What does he mean follow his lead?

He pauses, setting his weight back. “You’ve got questions, I get that, but I can’t answer them right now. Camille...”

His fingers stroke the spot he just pulled, loosening their hold in my hair.

“Know this isn’t about her, and it’s not about what happened in Désamour. That’s the first thing you need to get rid of.”

His eyes darken, and I trace the carved lines of his mouth, desperate to feel them again.

“You, Ivanya. It’s always been about you. That’s all I’ve got for you right now.”

He bends down, lips grazing the shell of my ear. “Out there... show them Mariée de la Mort.”

I’ve heard many people whisper that nickname, but never has it sounded quite like that. *Mah-ree-AY day-lah-mo*.

He leans back a little. “That is who you are, right?”

Silence.

My back hits the wall when he crowds in.

His eyes narrow. “Right?”

My heart skips several beats. “Camille will be wondering if you’re fucking your wife.”

“Answer my question,” he presses, not blinking. “Tell me I’m wrong. Lie to me again.”

Everything is quiet, the tension absorbing the space around us.

I step away from him, but he uses his body to cage me in place. He’s never going to let any of this go, but this isn’t only a secret that impacts me. It’s so much more than me, and it’s something an ego-hurt twenty-six-year-old can’t possibly understand.

No matter how much I want to make excuses for him, that's what he is.

"If you have to ask me such things, then you already know I can't answer." I hold his gaze. "And you never answer any of my questions."

Veins ripple over his neck.

I push on. "Where have you been for the past year?"

This is more than our argument now. I need to know how he got out.

"How'd you get out? Why aren't you upset that Parker is dead, since he was your friend, wasn't he? Why were you both fighting last winter?"

The muscles in his face relax, his eyes turning lazy.

I'm so glad I amuse him.

That grin spreads wide, pulling at every piece of control I have left.

"Stop thinking I'm one of you, Ivanya. If I were?" He chuckles, before it dies in his throat and he tilts his head. "You'd already be dead."

Since he's been back, it's been obvious how different he is. Harder. Every reason I fell so easily for him has been cut off, and now all that's left are scars and pain.

A rock forms in my throat. "What happened to you?"

He glares. "A lot."

I could pick this argument apart and start one hundred more, but truthfully, they can all wait.

Every single one of them—except the one that has Camille in it.

My tone stays level. "Camille. What is her play in this, hmm? Why is she even here?"

All amusement vanishes from his face, leaving a bored expression.

"Are you done with the jealousy thing?" He releases me. As soon as his hands aren't touching me I hate it.

Despite wanting to throw mine at him.

"This isn't about Camille, but to hopefully save her from meeting the wrath of the Bride of Death and becoming yet another tale they use to scare children with, I'll put you out of your misery."

He moves in again, the weight of it crawling up my spine. "Camille doesn't exist to me whenever you're in a room."

I turn my back to him, clutching the sides of the basin. I can't hear this.

He kisses a trail of fire up my neck. "No one exists to me when you're in a room."

Deep breaths.

His chest fills the space at my back, forcing my fingers tighter around the basin.

My eyes find his in the mirror. God, he's huge. He'd put on bulk since I'd last seen him in Veilarath.

"You keep asking the same questions." He tilts his head to study me. "Because you're not paying close enough attention."

His palm finds the open slit between my jeans and my crop, and in some weak attempt of regaining any kind of control, I try to yank them away. It's useless because for one, I don't really want him to, and for two, he's fucking strong.

He slips his pinky beneath my jeans and my eyes close, rage building with nowhere to go.

"Open your eyes, Venom," he whispers over my shoulder blade. "Did you miss me?"

His fingers dip beneath the lace, one skimming my swollen clit.

My legs give out, but he bucks his hips forward to hold me up.

He continues. "Wanna apologize for trying to kill me?"

I clear my throat when his thumb starts a slow circle. "I'm—"

He bites my shoulder. "And mean it."

The weight of his thumb intensifies, and I rock against him without thinking. "—sorry."

"Good girl." He kisses the top of my spine, removing his hand. "Ground rules moving forward. One? Don't fuck my brother, Two? Don't fucking blow it or I have to move to other measures, and three? Do what you do every time you take a job."

His eyes stay on mine. "Play house."

What. *The fuck*. Have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ASHER

IF WE ALL make it out of this alive, I know there's no way I'll be able to part with Asher's presence. I'll be tied to his name, his legacy, the damn spotlight that comes with it, for the rest of my living days.

I won't be able to resurrect the legends of Mariée de la Mort even if I want to.

As soon as I'm back in the living room, it's obvious the seating has changed. Camille relocating beside Asher doesn't surprise me as much as it annoys me.

It's desperate. She's desperate.

Fuck it all. If this is truly the way things are going to go down, then I guess I will play.

"Are you feeling okay?" Elea asks, squeezing my knee.

"Yes." I smile, side-eying Atlas when he stretches an arm along the back of the sofa behind me. "I think I'm just jet lagged."

"Mmm." She pops a grape in her mouth. "I've done that very flight multiple times throughout my life and it is not kind."

My smile doesn't fall. Not a single slip. Fucking robot, that's all I am. A robot with real feelings that have been twisted and trained, played with by everyone but myself.

Atlas's thigh brushes mine and my scalp prickles. Asher wants me to play house, but this isn't my script.

Wait. Did he say play house or did I imagine that?

Elea's attention shifts back to me. Up close, the similarities between her and her sons sharpen. "Ivanya...Dubois?"

My last name drops from her lips and my spine locks against the sofa.

She leans closer. "Interesting. Was it your father or your mother with that last name?"

Her shoulders are relaxed, eyes warm. It's a genuine question.

"My father," I reply honestly, welcoming the burn of alcohol down my throat.

At this stage, either I'm dying or all of them are, so there's no point in hiding what I would usually lie to protect.

"Ah." Elea nods, placing her empty glass on the small table. "Did Asher tell you we have French heritage too?"

He didn't. Neither did Atlas. Hell, I barely know anything about this family except his grandfather's billions and now his mother's unsettling kindness.

That's not forgetting his own special trick that makes me see red in less than five seconds, of course.

She waves the thought off. "Nothing too extravagant. Now, you!" Her finger lands on Camille, our conversation already lost. "When Khloe arrives, we cannot have another repeat of that Christmas. I get you and Asher have been friends since you were young, but we can't have any more arrests."

Camille ignores her, cleaning her nails.

Young? How young? In all the time I've seen Asher and her together, they've maybe been handsy a handful of times, none of them while we were on Veilarath.

Or maybe that's just my self-preservation feeding me lies.

Elea's voice cuts back in. "No dangerous acts. Best behavior. From all."

Camille scoffs. "It'll surprise you who is the most dangerous in this room."

My eyes snap to her, restraint crumbling beneath me. Years of training, years of perfecting control, all amounting to fucking nada if I get my hands around this woman's throat.

I hold her stare. "I believe you've dated him."

Her lip curls. "Yeah, because that's who I meant."

I smile. "I—" Was about to rip her face off.

Out of control.

“Camille.” Tension threads through Elea’s tone. Most wouldn’t catch the threat, but I’ve delivered similar ones myself.

Atlas’s arm slips from the sofa to my shoulders, nestling into my neck. “Mmm. You smell good.” His voice vibrates over me as his other hand lands on my bare belly, thumb circling. “Almost as good as you taste.”

Asher’s eyes harden on Atlas’s movements.

Blonde hair swings into my line of sight when Camille pats Asher’s arm. “Take me upstairs? I could do with a massage.”

Asher curls his hand around hers as she leads him out. I’m a complete idiot for believing a word of what he just said.

“I’m well out of my comfort zone,” I confess, forgetting I’m still sitting in a room full of witnesses, and none of them are mine.

I miss my life. Punk. Luce. Jord. Leon.

Elea squeezes my knee, then rises. “Come. I’ll make us a fresh drink.”

I stay seated, watching her disappear through the archway, still lost in my self-pity.

Atlas taps my thigh with his. “Follow her. She doesn’t like being ignored.”

I turn into him, ready to swear at him or I don’t know, put pressure on his weak points, when his eyes hold me in place. Why does he have to look so much like Asher yet not like him at all?

“Don’t look at me like that.” Atlas clucks his tongue, eyes narrowing on my lips. “I’m starting to get the gist of how he fell for you, Ivy...”

My pulse stutters. “He doesn’t know shit about falling, Atlas.”

“Oh, trust me.” He exhales through his nose. “I don’t think anyone wants to be privy to whatever it is you and my brother share, but for now, follow Mother.”

Not comforting.

I trace her steps through into the kitchen. A large window overlooks a roll of iced mountain tops. It’s the same as one side of my bedroom, only a different vantage point.

“When Asher was little, I watched him do all sorts of tricks on his board. It didn’t take long before the ramps were built and his little brother wanted exactly what he had.”

The sun catches the gold in her hair, and her tanned face stays eerily smooth when she reaches for a glass, not a single crease around her eyes or mouth.

I stop behind the oval kitchen island. “Did you bring them up in Chicago?”

“No.” She answers over her shoulder. “We moved there when the boys were small. I always wonder if Asher would have grown to be the man that he is today if we hadn’t.”

She dries the glass and places it on the counter, turning to face me and resting her back against the sink.

“I love my boys, but I’m not blind. You are a very beautiful woman, and you have all the attributes that I’m sure he thinks he needs.”

She keeps pouring shots into the cocktail shaker, but my head hasn’t left that bathroom. Whatever lives between us started from the same rotten place. Me, married. Him, engaged. And she’s still here, still attached to him like a second skin.

Now he’s upstairs, fucking her into a coma.

Anger simmers under my skin as my grip tightens around the stem of the cocktail glass. I was never good at emotional regulation, because I always drew from the only kind I knew. Hate. For men, in particular. Older ones.

Elea glances at my grip, then back at my face.

Now I have to watch the only man I’ve ever felt anything for parade whatever she is to him in front of me while I wait for the next ball to drop.

She gestures to the side. “Come on. I want to show you something.” She’s not quite reached the threshold when she calls out, “And you’ll want to bring your drink.”

I follow her, shoving my phone into my back pocket. The clean white kitchen gives way to dark moss walls. Ornate black frames hang around the room, with a chandelier dangling overhead. A round table sits beneath it, ringed by seven chairs. Seven. That number’s going to drive me crazy.

Elea pulls out a seat and sets two full glasses on the table, then turns to the cabinet behind her. Photo frames sit behind locked glass doors, rows of frozen smiles and rigid poses, and my eyes catch on each one as I sink into the chair opposite her.

I nod toward the cabinet. “Family portraits?”

She chuckles, stepping around the table. “Something like that.”

I twist the ring clasped around my finger, wondering if she’ll continue.

She lowers her glass and places down a leather-bound book. “I lost someone recently too. Actually,” she chokes on her laugh, “I’ve lost so

many people in my life that I'm beginning to think I'm cursed."

Her laugh dies as she slides it across the table, tapping the cover. "Here. I thought I'd show you some photos of Atlas and Asher when they were children."

I flick over the next page, and two boys stare back at me from a snow-blasted slope, both strapped to snowboards. One throws a hang-loose sign with a grin that's all teeth, the other has his middle finger aimed square at the lens.

"Ha!" Elea points to the photo with the hand holding her drink. "Now that was an interesting day. They both took the highest mountain in the world. Caused me a lot of grief. Boys. They're reckless."

She pauses and I flip to the next page. A woman and a man sitting in front of an old farmhouse. Same kind eyes as Elea, same smile.

"You were beautiful." I peer up at her. "Still are."

I was so distracted by her that I missed who was beside her.

Thick beard. *No. Not thick.*

I squint.

Familiar. So familiar it drags up the memories of him on the yacht. No. How did we miss this?

I rein in my spiraling questions, steadying my heart and showing not a single flinch across my face.

My silence must be obvious because she shifts in her chair to look at what has my attention. "The boys' father."

Parker was Asher's father. Not friend—fucking father!

Did she know what she was doing showing me this? Answering a question she knew her son wasn't giving me?

I push the book back towards her. "You have a lovely family."

What did this all mean? How could Asher be Parker's son without us knowing all this time?

Silence.

If I wasn't so lost in my own thoughts and focusing on not displaying it, I'd maybe had noticed that she was staring at me sooner.

"Thank you." She tips her glass in a cheers. "Ivanya?"

"Mmm?" I say, letting my face go soft and open. It always works. The perfect way to look unassuming is to play Innocent.

She flashes me a double-sided smile. "I—"

"There you are!" Atlas breaks the conversation.

Elea's eyes fly up to her son as he leans into me. "Come. I have to show you something that I think you might want to see."

Every muscle in Elea's face tightens before she nods, dismissing us.

Fucking Atlas and his stellar timing as per usual.

"Very well," she says, shooing us away. "I won't stop you kids."

I ease out from under his touch as he smiles at his mom. "We'll see you for dinner."

My chair scrapes against the floor when I push back, and before I can put enough distance between us, Atlas catches me around the waist, leading me down the hallway.

Instead of opening the doors to my room, he pushes through the black pair beside them, and Asher fucking Jameson hits me before I even cross the threshold.

His scent is everywhere.

A billiards table sits at the center, a large TV hanging on the opposite wall. The whole room is soaked in tobacco and spice.

Atlas closes us inside. "What'd she tell you?"

I keep walking until I reach the billiards table, sinking the eight ball with my knuckle. "Nothing. She showed me baby photos of you and Asher."

I turn to face him, crossing my legs at my ankles.

This room is almost a replica of mine. Only with emerald walls and a wrought iron staircase spiraling to a second floor.

Like every other room in this mansion, it boasts at least one floor-to-ceiling glass wall that takes in the view of the backyard. As if the person living inside it always needs reminding that he's cold.

Ha!

"Leave, Atlas." Asher's order cracks across the room.

Speaking of cold.

Asher rounds the table until he's close enough that I can count the pale stripes in his irises.

My lungs grow heavy as neither of us blinks. Is it always going to be like this between him and I? So fucking tense?

Atlas coughs once. "Ah, I don't know if this is safe." He shifts his weight near the door. "You sure neither of you are going to kill each other?"

Asher's lip twitches. "Undecided."

I shrug. "Probably."

Atlas sighs before the door clicks closed.

I never give Atlas enough credit. Clearly, he's trying his hardest to keep his brother alive. And even me... sometimes.

Asher searches my face, dragging his tongue over his lower lip. "Venom, whatever am I gonna do with you?"

I say nothing.

He takes another step and my eyes drop to the waistband of his sweats.

"—and I don't mean that," he deadpans.

I snicker, lifting a brow. "Amusing that you think I might."

Even his jaw looks harder, like he spent the whole year grinding his teeth while thinking up new ways to kill me.

But there's a flicker behind the scowl he wears every time I walk into a room. He hasn't managed to bury it beneath all that hatred. Yet.

I'm guessing it's the very thing keeping me alive.

He leans in, until his mouth is at my ear. "Might? Bet if I touched you right here." His hips arch into me. "You'd be wet enough to change it into a would."

He steps back. "Are you done with the lies?"

"What lies?" I answer, annoyed at the betrayal of my voice.

"Yeah. What I thought." He turns, gesturing out the door. "You can come back when you're done hiding shit."

"What about your lies, Asher?" I snap, the fresh news about Parker sitting right at the edge of my brain.

Only, I can't betray Elea. She didn't have to give me what she did and I don't want to punish her by being a snitch.

He shrugs, unfazed. "I never lied to you, Ivy. I remember specifically trying to tell you something right before you pulled that trigger."

"What happened to you?" I whisper again, but as the words leave my mouth I already know the answer.

Me. The answer is me.

Betrayal fills his face, and for the first time, he lets me see it.

How am I supposed to win back his trust if he's only ever going to see the girl who killed him?

He kicks away from the desk and crawls closer, winding my hair around his finger. "I hope you're wearing your best mask, Venom—" he lowers his voice until the air around us thins. "—Because you're gonna need it."

He lets the strand of hair fall, turning his back to me. "Get out."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ASHER

I'VE BARELY HIT the first few steps when I hear Mother's voice.

"Asher." She steps from the alcove beneath the stairs, arms crossed tight over her chest.

Here we fucking go. I've faced down avalanches that scared me less.

I halt mid-step, hand gripping the banister. "Late for you to be wandering around, isn't it?"

She doesn't smile.

I imagine she's more pissed than even I give her credit for, but that's on her. No one told her to come. In fact, we purposely tried to keep her away. Away from it all. But mainly away from Ivanya.

"You and I both know I do my best work late at night." She notices the tension in my shoulders, and her eyes soften a little. "Ivanya. What are you doing with her?"

Straight to the jugular.

I lean against the rail to buy a second. Every word is analyzed by her. You don't say a single fucking thing unless you want it to be known for exactly what it is.

The wood creaks under my weight. "What makes you think I'm doing anything?"

A laugh slips out of her. "Because I have eyes, Asher." She steps closer, bringing the smell of bourbon with her. Probably raided my finest shit. "I don't fault you for all that you've done, son. But you need to ask yourself if it is worth it."

My eyes snap back to her.

She doesn't back down. Hell no would my mother ever back down.

"You need to know when to stop, Asher, before everyone ends up with a bullet in their chest, and this time, I'm sure the shooter *won't* miss."

The accusation in her tone should bother me more than it does, but I've thought about it more times than I care to admit. The more she's around, the more I know I'm right, but then *he* happens. I see it flicker over her eyes whenever I bait her.

I rub my jaw. "It's not your concern, Mother. You know this."

For a moment I see the woman who despised the public eye, even though she'd lived in it her entire life. The woman who would've raised us alone a hundred times over if it meant never breathing the same air as my father again.

"Not my concern?" She uncrosses her arms, one manicured finger tapping my chest. "I won't sit back and watch you do to her what your father did to me, Ash."

Bold conversation for the middle of the stairs, but to be fair, it's the best vantage point in the house.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." I stare down at her. She's my mother, but she's never known our world the way Atlas, Khloe, and I do. She's been kept on the outside. Deliberately.

She snorts. "I know a lot more than you realize."

Heat rises up my throat. "You need to watch what you're saying."

She holds my gaze before giving one slow nod. "The fact remains. From where I'm standing, you, my son, may very well have it all wrong." Her hand finds my arm. "Be careful. For once."

Her robe trails behind her as she brushes past me.

I can't move.

Her words replay in my head with the same reel of memories that surface any time I second-guess myself.

Fuck.

Be careful. How does she expect me to react to that? You don't kill a monster by petting it to sleep.

I shake it off, or try to, pushing off the rail and heading down the hall toward my room. The door creaks open, and I climb the stairs up to the second level, each step a reminder that Ivy is in a replicated room right beside me, only without the loft.

My feet stop once I hit the top.

Sprawled naked across my bed, Camille traces lazy patterns over my black sheets. All her curves on display in the light of the gilded lamp at her side.

Most people wouldn't kick her out of bed on a bad day.

I ain't most people. "Get out."

It has nothing to do with physical appearances either. Even if Ivy wasn't more attractive than Camille, she carries something that others don't. Something you can't replicate. I mean fuck, she fucking shot me. That's probably it. Kills men. But doesn't just kill them, tricks them. Makes it hurt far more than a point five-oh bullet.

Camille's laugh cuts through my thoughts. "Missed you too. Come on, Asher. It's been months, a whole year."

I ignore her. She's been hovering since I got back. Clinging, demanding space in my bed like it's her right. And maybe it once was. Or maybe I'm a fucking liar.

She sits up slowly, sheets pooling around her waist, her face twisting. "What's with you? We're here now, Ash. Hello." She waves her hands around. "You captured the stray, now can we please relax? Once we land back in Coeur-de-Pierre, I'm going to have my fucking mother breathing down my back for the next task she's going to set me on."

I pull my shirt off over my head, tossing it aside. "You need to shut the fuck up, Camille."

And she does. The girl has a big-ass mouth.

"What?" She gapes at me.

I hold her stare. "Did I stutter? Why the fuck are you still here?"

Her silence stretches before she stands, the sheets falling away. She pads across the rug, sliding her hands around my waist.

"Where should I sleep, then?" She presses her mouth between my shoulder blades. "Atlas's room?" Fingers tighten on my hip. "Ivy's?" A pause. "Maybe I can see if she can still breathe with a pillow shoved over her face."

My hand flies to her throat, yanking her flush against me. She doesn't flinch. She meets my aggression with the stubbornness only someone who has a mother like hers can.

Every muscle in my body fights the impulse to do something stupid, and I shove her back until she hits the floor with a dull thud.

She recoils, wrapping her arms around her body.

“You’re a fucking asshole, Asher!” Her voice cracks before she grabs her robe from the foot of the bed, slipping it on with jerky movements. “Enjoy your empty bed along with your empty fucking life.”

As her footsteps die out, I drop onto the edge of the mattress, elbows braced on my knees.

Who the fuck are you really, Ivanya...

ATLAS ROUNDS the corner with a smirk that guarantees he’s gonna end up with my fist in his face. “Okay, don’t get mad...”

My jaw sets. “What is it?”

I didn’t get much sleep last night after kicking Camille out. Had Ivy running circles in my head until early hours of this morning.

“Khloe’s here.” He drags the words out, loving every second. His smirk widens. “And she brought Aléia.”

I set the blender bottle down hard enough to rattle the granite. “She what.”

Atlas lifts one shoulder, useless bastard, and leans against the doorway in his thermals with snow melting off the hem of his jacket. “Relax.”

“Fuck off,” I snap, twisting the lid on the shaker before leaving it on the counter and heading for the front door.

I close my hand around the handle, but it jerks inward before I get the chance.

Khloe throws her arms wide. “Surprise!”

“Oh good,” I deadpan, but fight the smile already spreading over my face. “My least peaceful sibling.”

She gasps. “Rude. I bring joy.”

I lift a brow. “You bring noise.”

She launches at me anyway, and I catch her around the waist because reflex doesn’t care how much of a menace she is.

Her face presses into my chest for half a second before she rises on tiptoe, mouth against my shirt. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t stop Aléia from coming.”

“Figured,” I mutter, as Aléia ghosts in behind her, mouth already locked in that tight-ass line she wears when she’s contemplating how she wants to ruin someone’s life.

Sinead takes her coat, throwing me a lopsided glance before disappearing.

“Huh,” Aléia mutters, as if we’re all beneath her. “I expected... more.” She doesn’t have to say it for me to know she means the house.

Atlas stretches his mouth into a fake smile that shows all his teeth. “Lovely to see you too, Aléia.”

“Atlas.” Aléia barely spares him a glance, plucking the gloves from her hands.

Footsteps click overhead, and Mom appears at the top of the stairs in a smoke-colored cashmere set, one hand sliding along the railing as her whole face warms the second she sees Khloe.

Actually warms, stripped of all her usual polished bullshit.

“My girl.”

Twisting out of my arms, Khloe darts up the first few steps to meet her.

Mom pulls her in, kissing her temple, then frames her face with both palms as she draws back. Khloe’s smile goes soft, holding right up until Aléia moves deeper into the foyer. Then it changes.

She stiffens, eyes narrowed on Aléia.

Before it gets even more awkward, the terrace door opens behind Atlas, and Ivy slips in, shoving her goggles into her dark hair.

Her tanned skin is flushed, green eyes bright, breath still loose from the cold bite of winter. I can’t help it, my eyes drop down her body. Tight black long-sleeve top, black tights, cropped puffer, and snow stuck to her calves like the mountain is still on her skin.

Pride hits me clean in the chest.

Fuck me.

I almost grin.

Aléia turns then, her eyes landing on Ivy like she’s been waiting for her. “So this is the wife,” she says, mouth flat. “I expected less... athletic wear and more shame.”

Heat rips through me so fast it locks every muscle in my body, and I step between them. “Aléia.”

She hesitates, tilting her chin out while refusing to look at Ivy. She knows better than to push me, and if she’s forgotten, well... I have no problem reminding her.

Ivy looks up at me from below, brow raised and gloves half off. No doubt she caught my tone. The fact that she always finds it amusing when

I'm pissed off should have been enough for me to stay away. Instead, I fucking married her.

Aléia shrugs dismissively. "What? She shot you. I assume etiquette died before your pulse came back."

My lip twitches. "Keep looking at her like that in *my* house and you'll find out just how much etiquette survived."

Khloe claps loud, because she doesn't give a fuck as a person, but also hates Aléia. "Okay. Great energy in here. Love that for us."

Camille gasps. "Mommy!" She flies down the stairs in a silk set, barefoot, hair bouncing.

Khloe sticks her finger in her mouth to gag, and Camille shoulder-barges past her on purpose, earning a death-promise scowl from my little sister.

Aléia softens for her daughter, almost sweet, if I didn't know what lives under her skin.

Camille leans back, smiling at her *mommy*. Her eyes drift to Ivy and that smile vanishes, turning to disgust.

Ivy plucks the last glove off finger by finger, expression blank enough to be insulting.

Khloe gasps. "Oh my God."

She crosses the foyer in three quick steps and grabs Ivy by both forearms as though they've been friends for years instead of four seconds. "You were made for me, not him. We're going to be best friends."

Ivy blinks once. "I won't argue."

I lift a brow. "The fuck you won't. All you ever do is argue."

Khloe beams wider. "With you. That's all she ever does *with you*." She bats her lashes back to her new bestie. "I do hope your drink-making skills are better than your aim."

I flip her off.

Khloe hooks her arm through Ivy's and starts steering her toward the hallway. "Come on. You can tell me everything. Start with how he deserves it, continue with whether you can make a decent martini, and then we'll discuss wardrobe theft because if this is your style, I already want half your closet."

Ivy lets herself be led a few steps and glances back at me over her shoulder. Here I am, wanting things I shouldn't want in front of people I absolutely shouldn't want them in front of.

This is such a fucking bad idea.

Khloe tugs her onward. "Don't look at him. He'll make it weird."

Elea descends the last few steps, gaze following Khloe and Ivy until they disappear around the corner. Her eyes find me and I already know what she's thinking. *That right there is why this is a bad idea.*

Yeah. I know.

I'm out-fucking-voted.

I always knew Mother would love her. Khloe too. Hell, Khloe would love a loaded gun if it rolled its eyes at me and wore black.

My family took one look at Ivy and saw exactly what I did. A woman who doesn't give a fuck about the riches of a man, or the power one may think he has. They see the fight in her the same way I always have.

Aléia smooths a hand over Camille's hair before looking at me. "We'll need to discuss a lot."

I let out a dry laugh. "We won't."

Aléia's mouth tightens. "Asher..."

"No." I hold her gaze. "I won't talk this shit with you in my house."

Atlas whistles under his breath. "Damn."

I cut him a look. "Shut up."

Elea crosses the foyer, brushing past Aléia without touching her.

"We're doing dinner on the rooftop," she announces to no one in particular. "At sunset. I'm making my famous roast."

I bet she is. I'm just wondering which of us she's gonna cook first.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IVY

FOR THIRTY MINUTES STRAIGHT, Khloe yaps on about—I don't even know at this point.

She paces with the spatula she grabbed mid-rant about Camille. Clearly, She's protective of a brother who definitely doesn't need protecting from anyone but himself.

I shouldn't like her. She's every conversation I've learned to dread, wrapped in designer clothes and a Victoria Secret smile. She's inquisitive and quick-witted with good cheekbones.

I don't say any of this out loud. I just watch as she continues on about the time Asher and Atlas crashed her first date. It's strange, to hear these stories. I almost forgot that Asher was a simple man, and not a complication that I created.

"Anyway!" She releases a breath. "You look amazing."

I catch my reflection in the mirror and almost laugh.

Cinched tight enough to make breathing a privilege, the black lace plunges low at the neckline with a slit that rides high up my thigh. It gives me straight Maleficent with a body count vibes. Khloe's is the same, only red, looking all expensive and dramatic. On me, it gives death.

Which... fair.

My hair stays down, ironed flat along my back, since I've got no clue how to do anything else but drag a brush through it.

Twisting the lid back on a tube of lipstick, Khloe leans in and drags her thumb over the corner of my mouth to fix what I missed.

“There,” she says, pleased with herself. “Perfect. I can’t wait to see Asher’s face.”

I inspect her work. “Why?”

She grins, flashing pearly whites. “Because he’s going to be hurting, and in turn, that pleases me.”

Tossing the gloss onto the vanity, I scoff. “Your brother doesn’t hurt.”

When she doesn’t answer, I find her already watching me in the mirror. “Well, if that fails, at least he loves you in black.”

My shoulders stiffen. “You don’t know that.”

Khloe catches my reaction. She’s way too observant to not, and I’m currently way too fragile to hide it. I’m starting to get the gist of this family dynamic and their specialties. Reading people is probably a shared family hobby, right beside emotional repression and delayed torture.

She lifts one shoulder. “Please. To everyone else, Asher is a master at hiding his feelings behind steel walls and a pretty smile, but I know him—”

That’s not the Asher I came to know at all. Not until recently, at least.

I open my mouth, mostly because I want to know where she heard the him liking me in black thing, when the door swings open onto Atlas.

His eyes drag over me with zero shame, from the lace at my chest to the slit at my leg. There’s enough mischief darkening his smirk to know exactly how this night is going to play out.

He whistles. “You look fucking good, V.”

Khloe plants a hand on her hip. “What about me?”

Rolling his eyes, Atlas pushes off the doorframe. “You look aight.” His mouth twitches, and when Khloe looks away, his face softens toward his sister.

Khloe points the lipstick tube at Atlas like a weapon. “You’re dead to me.”

Atlas clutches his chest, feigning shock. “Again? That’s, what, the fifth time this month?”

“Sixth.” Khloe snatches her clutch off the vanity without looking at him. “After you sent me on a wild chase across the damn Atlantic.”

Atlas presses his lips together to hold back his laugh, but nods slowly. “Okay, sure, that wasn’t fair, but when I lost, you dropped me in the middle of the Drake Passage with a bunch of Fisherman and I legit almost died, so...”

Khloe groans and moves for the door. “You and Asher always complain when it’s my turn, but none of you hear me bitch when I have to walk six days through the desert because you wanted to see how long the human body could last without fucking water!”

I lift my finger. “What is going on right now?”

Atlas waits for me to pass first. “A game we play. It’s called Around the World. Basically every month, we jump on call, and talk about all the shitty things that happened to us that month. The one who has the least, loses, and the other two get to choose where to drop the loser in the world with nothing but a bag that we pack.”

I sigh, shaking my head. “You’re all insane.”

Khloe chuckles. “Welcome to the family.”

I brush by Atlas as he closes the bedroom door, and he dips his head just enough that his voice stays between us. “You’re about to ruin my brother’s evening.”

Without turning, I keep my voice low. “I don’t know about that.”

Khloe moves ahead of us in a red flash, muttering under her breath about ungrateful brothers and the legal rights of younger sisters, as Atlas falls into step beside me, hands in his pockets.

I focus on walking. On the drag of the dress against my thighs. On the ache in my ribs every time I breathe too deep. On anything but the stupid sentence still circling in my head. *Think of Atlas in the Drake Passage with a bunch of fishermen ready to throw his ass overboard.*

A laugh vibrates low in my belly.

He loves you in black.

It dies.

Where did she hear that? From Elea? From Atlas? From Asher himself? which feels the most ridiculous.

We take the stairs toward the rooftop, the sounds of dinner growing clearer with every step. By the time we reach the top landing, my pulse is beating hard enough to piss me off.

I tell myself it’s the heels. It’s the dress, the climb, and that I haven’t been getting in enough cardio lately...which I better fix. I tell myself it’s the fact I’m still mourning Nonna and my steps are heavier because it’s the extra weight of her death on my soul.

Khloe pushes through the terrace door and wind hits my bare skin, dragging the smell of crisp seasoned meat with it. Candlelight moves across

the long table, catching crystal glasses and black plates that lead to where Elea is already seated, chin tilted, spine perfect, and hand resting on her goblet of red wine. She's staring forward, and I follow her line of sight to where Aléia is talking quietly with Camille, leaning beside the railing.

Movement catches my eye and the tension in my muscles eases when I spot Daniel, standing beside Sinead. Camille and her mother waltz to the dining table, and I give Daniel a short nod. *Appreciate your service once again.*

Then I land on Asher and my stomach drops.

Turning from whatever Camille is yapping on about, he holds a glass loosely at his side, his expression half bored.

"Ah! You're all here." Elea claps, pushing up from the table with a smile that was definitely not on her face a moment ago. "Come, Ivy, honey, sit at the other end of the table."

Head of the table means every single person sitting here has a direct view of me whenever they want. Not really comforting, considering the guests, but I lower onto the chair anyway, buying myself a second to compose myself.

Khloe takes my right, and Atlas falls to my left, stealing the empty spot between Asher and I. Camille makes a squeal sound, before her heels clap against the floor as she rounds the other side of Asher, leaving her mother directly opposite her.

I wanted to ignore him for the rest of the night, but that's hard to pull off when he's directly in my line of sight. Camille looks pretty. I'll give her that much. Pale yellow silk, thin straps, the whole delicate little package. The evening wind cuts across the terrace, pushing the fabric against her nipples despite the heaters lined up behind us.

It's cold. Too cold to be wearing what I am.

Daniel and Sinead settle near Khloe, Daniel straight-backed, Sinead slouched with one tattooed wrist hooked around a wineglass.

Silver clinks against porcelain, candles guttering in the wind while waves hit rocks somewhere below us in a slow rhythm. I feel off. Which irritates me more than the seating chart. I've been trained for rooms exactly like this since before I knew algebra. Smile if needed. Lie if needed. Do worse if needed.

Heat spreads up the side of my neck, settling heavy on my face. This particular brand of pain is Asher's, and I know if I turn my attention to him

right now, I'll find him glaring right at me.

I reach for the water. Wine can wait. Wine makes people think you're pressed, which I am not. Well... I am, but not enough to show it, at least not yet.

Khloe buries her hand in the breadbasket. "So!" her tone high with sarcasm. "if anyone starts a family war before appetizers, I call dibs on live-streaming it."

Atlas lifts his glass. "You do have more followers than me but less than Asher, so I guess that makes sense..."

Camille's laughter cuts through the sibling banter. "Charming."

"Let's attempt one meal without threats," Elea tells the table, fixing her attention on Atlas and Khloe.

Aléia clears her throat. "Asher—" Cutting herself off, she glares at me. What the fuck is her problem?

I follow the direction of her stare, catching Asher already looking my way.

Ah, I see. She was following his line of sight.

Matching his stare, I refuse to back down as I swallow my drink.

Then his lashes fan over his cheeks when his focus drops from my mouth. He sure is taking his time eye-fucking me with his ex, both mothers, and his siblings right there.

Bold.

Ignoring the heady throb of my own pulse, I stab my fork into slice of meat. "The food is great, Elea. Did you make this?"

"I did!" Elea's eyes widen along with her smile. "How are you feeling all the way down there?"

Elea's got this way about her, like I've known her for years, and I couldn't tell you why. Khloe must get it from her.

"Like a bride being served up for slaughter."

Khloe chokes on her wine.

A waiter moves to my side, blocking my view and pours a glass of Pinot.

Now I don't give a fuck if I look pressed.

Out of the corner of my eye, every few seconds Camille touches or grabs or caresses Asher, but I lock onto all that is fucking holy and focus on cutting my meat. Chewing slow, drinking fast...

Elea's gaze flicks up at me as she slices into a buttered spud. "How's your room? Is everything comfortable?"

I'm about three seconds away from screaming. From asking what the fuck is wrong with this family and why—why—do they all seem so...

Calm. Like hey, it's cool that you tried to kill my son but didn't, also how's the room he's keeping you hostage in?

I tip my glass in her direction. "Swell."

My eyes wander before I can stop them, finding Asher with his face buried in Camille's neck.

She giggles, melting into him.

My cheeks grow hot, darkening the edges of the room.

I'm going to kill her. And then I'm going to kill him for not killing her.

My phone buzzes against the table with Punk's name lighting up the screen. No doubt bikini photos, margaritas, and fucking confetti. Yet here I am, back in this house at my own will.

I drink more.

"Here!" Khloe taps at my thigh. "Selfie. I know all the Ashvy fans wanna see it since this fucker hasn't posted you again yet."

I lean into Khloe as she snaps a range of shots and Aléia and Elea bicker down the other end of the table.

Khloe flips through the selfies, scrutinizing each one as I sit here with my wine and my rapidly deteriorating grip on civilization.

"Ivy, you look insane!" she shakes her head with a smile. I'd otherwise cringe at the compliment, but I'll take what I can right now, especially since Camille is within earshot.

Atlas leans over the table. "Lemme see."

She jerks the phone away. "Back up, predator."

He glares. "I'm family."

She shrugs, baiting him. "Which somehow makes it worse..."

I snort into my glass before I can stop myself, and Asher's eyes land on me. Camille laughs at something he doesn't say, sliding her hand up his forearm like she's trying to win a contest only she's participating in. It does the job, because now he's turned back to her, their performance stealing my appetite.

I cut into the meat on my plate again, biting the piece into my mouth while being careful not to smudge my lipstick.

How long do I have to endure this? Another hour? Two minutes?

Asher lowers his mouth to her ear and says something to make her smile turn lazy.

My wine curdles in my stomach.

I hate him. I fucking *hate* him.

Khloe makes a wounded noise. “Rude. We are literally curating perfection over here and those two are putting on a show.”

Was that a smirk from Sinead? I’m drunk.

Elea sighs, lowering her knife and fork. “Khloe.”

“What?” she glances around the table. “I’m right.”

“You usually are,” Atlas mutters, chewing his food.

Khloe beams proudly. “Thank you.”

My phone buzzes again. Punk. Then Luce right after. They always have impeccable timing to rub in my suffering.

Atlas nudges his head toward my plate. “Eat something, V.”

“Are you worried about me?” I tip my chin up, all wide eyes and zero sincerity.

He huffs a breath through his nose, amusement ghosting across his face. “No. I’m worried you’re going to stab somebody with a steak knife and ruin dessert.”

I glance at him. “There are worse losses.”

His mouth twitches.

Across the table, Camille leans into Asher again, fingers brushing the open collar of his shirt, and he lets her. More than lets her. Encourages it. He goes lazy in his chair, one hand sliding onto her thigh, angled just right so I have a full, unobstructed view of exactly how little he gives a fuck. The worst part is that he knows I’m watching. He can probably feel it the same way I do.

I empty my glass, swallowing it in one go, before Khloe gasps from my side. “Oh, this one is it. Ivy looks hot. I’m posting. If I have to sit through this weird incest-adjacent jealousy pageant, I deserve joy.”

Camille stiffens, and Elea closes her eyes for one brief second like she’s speaking privately to God.

Atlas holds out his hand. “Phone.”

Khloe finally gives it up, and he studies the screen, then whistles low. “She’s right.”

I don’t need to see the photo. I know what I look like.

Shaking my head, I let Khloe have her fun, since she's right. Tonight is fucking weird enough.

Khloe points at me like she's presenting a prize. "Tell me she doesn't look hot."

"Khloe," Elea warns, but I see the flicker of a grin. Huh. Could little chaos have earned this trait from her mother?

"What?" Khloe widens her smile, eyes glistening with absolute mania. "I'm asking the table."

We all kind of know she isn't...

Atlas turns the phone a little, angling it away from the candles. "Smash."

Khloe bursts out laughing, and the tension in the air just cracked up a notch.

Camille says something to Asher, but he doesn't answer, too focused on Atlas, before shifting to me.

Oh, oh... have we rocked his perfect boat?

Before I can give him my widest smile, a weight drops in my gut. I should look away. I don't.

Asher's mouth curls, his voice low. "You having fun?"

The whole table goes still, and Khloe leans back with her lips pressed together like she's biting down a grin.

My eyes land on him. "Oh, are you talking to me?"

Blood rushes behind my ears, muffling out the sound of Atlas cussing beneath his breath.

Asher raises a brow. "I am, actually."

Being the absolute fool that he is, Atlas further baits his brother, winking at me with a smirk.

"Are you done?" Asher snaps at him, his body rigid as he leans back.

"With dinner?" Atlas teases, testing his boyish charm.

Asher glares at him. "With acting like a fucking idiot."

Silence.

Atlas's smile thins. "You'll have to narrow that down."

Is Atlas purposely pissing him off? Or is this all an act?

Camille places a hand on Asher's arm, soft and soothing and *fully* suicidal. "Ash, don't."

His gaze doesn't leave Atlas. Or me. Hard to tell who he wants to kill more. Kind of wish it was me so I could at least be out of this dinner.

Khloe, because she was clearly born without fear, picks up her phone again. “Wait, no one move. I need one candi—”

“Khloe,” Elea whines, rolling her eyes. “Must you be—”

Too late.

The flash goes off, snapping the slow curl of Asher’s smile. If I was a better woman, I’d tap out here. I’d pack up my things and go to bed.

Leaning back in my chair, I swirl the Pinot in my glass.

I’m not a better woman. I’m barely half of one.

“I mean,” I let the words marinate in my mouth. “I’m not even sure if I would have turned you down, Atlas. You know, had I seen you first...”

Everything stops. The chatter, movement, even Khloe’s giggle dies an instant death.

Not literally. Sadly, nobody bursts into flames.

Tension breaks when Asher leans one elbow on the table. “And if you had?” he asks, his tone calm. “Seen him first.”

I could lie. I could turn this into a joke, smooth it over, throw Khloe another one-liner and let the moment pass. Instead, I look right at him and say, “Then maybe I would have saved a bullet.”

Khloe mutters, “Jesus Christ.”

Camille shifts closer to Asher. “This is ridiculous.”

“You are free to leave, Camille. It’s Ivy that isn’t,” Sinead says matter-of-fact. I kind of love them for it. I shouldn’t because they basically just announced that I am locked here.

Asher continues glaring at me, and the pressure of it gets under my skin. Maybe I should throw my drink in his face, *or climb into his lap*, or fuck this whole night off and go for a twenty-mile run and hope it kills me.

Atlas reaches for his wine. “To be fair, I am objectively less emotionally catastrophic.”

Asher doesn’t spare him a glance. “Nobody asked you.”

“I think she did, actually,” Atlas whispers, so low it makes me wonder if his self-preservation is finally kicking in.

My mouth twitches, ignoring Camille rubbing up on Asher’s arm like she has any control over this man.

I’m not jealous. *I’m homicidal*. It’s different.

“Okay, children! Are we quite done? I’d like to go back to the normal chatter.” Bless Elea, because what did she expect? This is a damn Crime Documentary waiting to happen.

Lifting his glass, Asher keeps his eyes pinned on me over the rim. I need to move, need to hit something. Need to get out of this chair before I combust or turn this into a blood dinner.

Stretching my legs under the table, I knock the pointed toe of my heel into Asher's shin.

His eyes narrow at me, his hand pausing near his mouth.

Reaching for my wine, I smile sweetly. The room shrinks to that inch between his leg and mine, my stomach pulling tight.

A second later his foot drags slow along my ankle.

I almost choke.

Everything happening around us blends into nothing. Khloe is saying something to Daniel. Aléia is answering Elea with enough annoyance it's the first thing I pick up, and I don't even know what Atlas is doing because I don't give a fuck.

Levelling my stare, I keep composure. "How's Camille?" I ask Asher, because apparently I'm committed to making bad choices tonight.

"I'm fine, thank you," Camille answers, most likely giving me her dirtiest look.

I wasn't talking to you. I just need a distraction.

Asher's mouth shifts like he hears the thought. "The same."

I slide my foot farther and jab him harder in the shin, but his knee parts and his hand disappears under the table, catching it.

Oh, absolutely not.

Twisting my foot out of his grip, I smile into my wine as I drive it forward again, this time slightly to the right just in case he decides to try to dodge me again. It lands with a loud thud, and he jerks back.

Motherfucker. Okay. I need to leave.

"Ivanya?" Aléia's voice drags me back. "It's a shame you and Asher don't get along. We could really do with your... expertise in Dovecrest."

I don't know what the fuck she's talking about, but I file the word for later.

I'm about to ask more questions when Asher cuts in. "Khloe."

The table goes quiet for the hundredth time tonight, and Khloe snickers under her breath, hooking her arm through mine. "Come, let's go raid big brother's expensive whiskey and dance naked on OnlyFans."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ASHER

I WAIT until their laughter and footsteps disappear, turning to Daniel with a nod.

He pushes to his feet, grabbing his coat from the back of the chair and excusing himself.

The muscles in my neck tighten. I crack my head to the side, swirling whiskey around in my glass.

“You good?” Atlas asks, swinging back on his chair.

I clench my teeth.

“Hey.” Camille places her hand on my arm, something she’s been able to do all night, but this time my head snaps to her.

She winces, removing it, and I go back to sipping my drink.

“Asher, I think—”

“—I think,” I cut Aléia off before she gets too comfortable having an opinion. “You need to shut the fuck up and not say a goddamn word before I send you back to your husband in pieces.”

Aléia’s mouth falls open, but her cheeks flush a deep, angry red. She hates it. Hates that she can’t play doctor on me anymore.

Nobody moves.

Candlelight catches the rims of the glasses across the table, showing every bit of rage on Aléia’s face.

She wants to slap me. She knows better.

I lean back, the whiskey warm in my hand, and let the silence stretch until everyone’s nerves start to fray. Atlas taps his thumb once against the

stem of his glass, going still when I look at him. Mother stays quiet, her eyes fixed on Aléia as she waits to see if this gets ugly enough for her to step in.

My mind keeps moving, running through the night in broken pieces.

I set my glass down as Aléia pushes her chair back. If she thinks I'm gonna let her take over and bitch about tonight, she's making another mistake.

Her shoulders pull straight, her chin lifting. "Asher."

She wears that same polished concern whenever she plans to interfere and call it care. It worked better when I was younger, before I learned the price you pay each time someone claims they're protecting you.

Bracing one hand on the table, she looks at me. "I won't be spoken to like this."

My mouth twitches.

The vein in her forehead is about one smart ass response away from exploding.

"You're out of control!" She gasps. I'd laugh if I could be fucked.

I hold her stare. "You have *no idea*."

There's a battle that stirs within her, her mouth opening and closing as she weighs up her options. She knows better than to go toe-to-toe with me.

"Here's what's going to happen from now." My tone stays level, borderline bored. "You're going to leave this house, and trust that I'm doing what the *fuck* I'm supposed to do."

Camille sucks in a deep breath, her spine snapping straight. "Ash—"

I lift my hand to stop her from making an even bigger fool of herself than she already has. Ivy is fucking smart, more than that, she's street smart. Camille's antics tonight would have been nothing more than entertainment to her.

Aléia stares back at me like I've spoken a different language. What the fuck is she thinking? That I'll change my mind? I won't. She's lucky I'm letting her walk out of here at all.

She turns her back to me and storms toward the exit.

Guess that's her answer.

Camille rushes after her, no doubt to attempt to calm her down. With good reason. Most people who know Aléia spend a great deal of time *not* upsetting her.

With just Atlas, Mom, Sinead and me left, I relax into my chair and let my eyes move over each of them one by one.

“This? It’s got a shelf life. And that shit’s expiring a lot sooner than any of you fuckers think. So stay in line.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IVY

I'M hellbent on finding an outlet before I trip and land on a Jameson dick. Can't decide which brother would be worse.

Actually... it's still Asher.

Slipping out of my bedroom, I try to remember where Atlas said the gym was as I tiptoe through the kitchen.

Ah, outside. That's right.

I slide open the doors that lead onto the patio and step out into the cold snap of a Veilarath morning. Warmer clothes would have been ideal, sure, but I'd be lying if I said my blood wasn't still hot from last night.

I've never lacked verbal stamina and can spar with about anyone, but who I decide to step into the ring with is the real question. For one? I have to care about you, or about what the conversation is about, or, on the rare occasion, I'm starved of endorphins from not being put out on a job in a while. All but one was true last night.

Toward the landing of the slope, a smaller building of glass sits almost buried beneath snow. There. That has to be what Atlas was talking about.

I crack the door open. It's bigger than it looks from the outside, treadmills lining one wall, weight machines crowding the other. A punching bag hangs in the corner by itself, and I drop my phone and water beside the nearest table, climbing onto the treadmill.

Opening Spotify, I hit play on whatever song and start with a jog, goosebumps breaking over my skin as my body warms into its rhythm.

I showed too many cards last night. Too much emotion. Emeric would be disgusted. I jack the treadmill up to ten and run like I'm being hunted, sweat gathering at my collarbone before dripping onto the belt.

The miles fall away into the nothingness, and I let the music swallow me whole until it's just stride, warmth, and that deep burn in my lungs. When my muscles start to wobble with fatigue, I hit the red button, and the machine eases down into silence.

I jump off, snatch up my phone, and stalk toward the bag, an old D12 track pounding through my ears as I work the glove over one hand.

My phone lights with an Instagram notification.

I stop cold.

My Instagram has never been private, but I only turned notifications back on this morning after Khloe tagged me in every photo from last night.

I tap the screen and the app opens.

Punk handled my social media in those first years with Asher. We were never that worried. Even if people went digging, they wouldn't get far. Not that I ever hid who I was, because that's not how Playhouse works. You're yourself the whole time. It's the foundation life that gets the fake name. Your *so-called* real life.

I close the app after I lose track of the comments. I need research. I need to be Punk, Leon, and Luce crammed into one body if I'm going to survive whatever the hell I've landed in. If I didn't have family, I probably wouldn't care. I took out Parker. That was my mission, the single thing my whole life had narrowed to. But I can't let the people I love get buried in the fallout because my stupid heart ran after a boy with a pretty smile and eyes that see into my soul.

I catch my reflection in the mirror and pause. May as well play the game.

I'll feed the fandom since they've probably seen the crazy party photos, the wild dinner from last night, and whatever else Camille has planted there.

ASHVY is over. I swear it.

Anyone see that reel of dude being tossed onto a balcony?

She is fucking Atlas not Asher.

With a smirk, I lift my hand and snap a shot.

I study the photo. It'll do. My hair's pulled into a high ponytail, dark waves spilling down my back. My tanned skin is slick with sweat, and the

lighting above cuts enough shadow beneath my cheekbones to hide the lack of sleep.

What was the last thing I ate? God. Probably the small slice of lamb last night before I lost my fucking appetite.

I type out a caption but then scrub it. It doesn't need one.

I hit post, shove the glove on, and turn back to the bag.

An hour later, I fall to the ground, dragging in heavy breaths as the morning sun pours through the glass.

My ringtone cuts through Eminem and Dr. Dre rapping about Guns Blazing.

I hit answer. "What?"

"Damn. Cranky, much?" Lucinda slurs from sleep.

"Sorry." I wince, staring up at the glass ceiling. Snow drifts down outside, whitening my view. "I've had a rough... night."

"Mmhm. Which brother?" She flips a light switch with a yawn.

"None. Just restlessness." I almost spill everything, from Elea telling me about Parker to the drama last night that nearly ended in murder, but I can't pull them any deeper into something that's starting to feel personal. If Parker is their father, then Asher showing up in my life was never coincidence. Same as the thing he started to say on my birthday before I fucking shot him.

"None?" She answers, disappointment heavy in her tone. "Not even from the only man who's ever caressed the soul of the famous Mariée de la Mort?"

"I'm not even going to entertain that comment with an answer." I miss her. I miss all of them, and it's only been a couple of days.

"I called to let you know Punk and Leon picked up new jobs." She pauses, sheets shifting softly on her end. "I think we're all just trying to keep busy, and the only way any of us knows how is to bury ourselves in work."

Unfortunately...

"And you?" I ask, after she's finished cussing at her fitted sheet.

"I think, for now, I'm sticking to our good old mundane-ass life. No bullets. No death."

I chuckle. "Sounds nice."

She goes quiet. "Because I want to be with you. Create me as you wish, but I need in, Ivy. I can't have you sitting there alone. That's not how this

works. There's just something... off with him. Both of them."

Lucinda is Lucinda for a reason. She hears what people don't say. Listens to the silence, watches the flinch, the pause, the delayed reaction, and picks away at it all until she's left with whatever it is you're hiding underneath. And she's good at it.

"If you jump into this, you don't get our foundation life yet." Home base is the foundation life. We all built something outside the blood and bullets. It's the lives waiting for us when we finally hang our holsters and sheath's. Mine is the publishing house and Chicago. I've never had the guts to open my inner circle wider than my PA, but it's there when I need to reset, or when I finally decide I'm done. There's only one absolute, and that's that our jobs never leak into that life.

This one is getting too fucking close. Parker was too close.

She holds her breath. "Then I won't."

There's no way I'm winning this fight, not with all the time she now has to argue. "Fine!"

"Yes!" I can just see the triumph. "Also, hot Insta shots. Both last night, and now."

I groan. "Last night was his sister's doing."

"Sounds like I'll like her." As if it's hard to get Luce to like you.

She would. Too much...

"I'll call you back. I need to go shower before Camille finds me and I put a matching bullet in her too." I push up off the ground and head back through the main house. Without my pal rage keeping me warm, the cold feels a lot like ice melting in my lungs.

Stepping through the door, I try to shake my shivering when awareness prickles the back of my neck.

"Good workout?" His voice stops me, and I carefully slide the door closed.

I turn to face him. "Yes, actually."

Jesus fucking Christ. Does he have to walk around shirtless, every line of ink on full display? Doesn't help that I know what each one looks like from every angle.

He leans forward, abs tensing as he places a shaker on the coffee table. "How was the rest of your night?"

I shrug, doing my best to avert my gaze. "I slept."

His legs widen as he sinks back into his chair.

I spent so much time trying to prove to him that he wasn't my target, that he was real to me, that I missed the most important detail of all. He may be my exception, but what if I'm not his?

The thought leaves a coat of acid on my tongue, and I continue for my bedroom, putting as much distance between us as I can when I pass him.

His fingers catch mine, igniting a riptide of heat that travels right to my toes.

"Hey." The gentleness in his tone gives me whiplash.

I tense, and his mouth snaps closed. He noticed.

"You think I fucking like this?" He tugs my finger, forcing me to look down at him.

I rip my hand free, but he catches it again, eyes narrowing.

Seconds crawl between us.

"And what exactly is *this*?" I snap, emotional intelligence bottoming out.

He doesn't answer.

Words die in my throat, and every second his hand holds mine the burn only deepens.

I pull away again, and this time he lets me. Before he can say something that'll leave me purring in his lap like a pathetic fucking house cat, I rush down the hall and shoulder past Atlas. The bedroom door clicks shut behind me as my back hits the wood.

My head thumps against it, once, twice.

I hate this. I want out.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I start counting backward from twenty.

With one step left between me and the door, it flies open. Asher kicks it shut behind him. The slam drowns out whatever Atlas was shouting down the hall.

Coming closer, he tilts his head. "I know why I'm mad, but why the *fuck* are you mad?"

"Why am I *mad*?" Fire rushes through my veins. I dig my fingers into my palms before I finally fucking swing. "Maybe because why the fuck am I here, Asher?"

He leans back against the door with a low exhale, his gaze never leaving me. "You know why."

I spread my arms wide, sarcasm coating every word. "Oh, because you want revenge?" I hold them there. "Then here. Have at it. Get your revenge,

but make it fucking quick.”

His jaw tightens, a muscle ticking along it. Taking its time, his gaze travels over me as warmth licks across every inch it touches.

My voice breaks. “I can’t do this, Asher.” I swallow. “I told you. I wasn’t pretending. It was all real. Parker was my job, has been since I was a fucking child.”

I stop. Shit. The word vomit really needs to chill.

Clearing my throat, I shift my weight back, but he’s already closing the distance.

He takes his time between each word. “What do you mean?”

My gaze snaps to his. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

He lifts his hand, but I step back, the space between us charged with tension.

“You were real,” the admission is rough, like my body tried to force it back down. “I never—”

His shoulders draw tight as his features harden.

Pressing my lips together, I try to do what I was trained to do. Shut the fuck up. Only I’ve never been able to do that around him.

Asher steps in close enough that I have to tip my chin up.

“Never what?” His hand flexes at his side, blue eyes fixed on my mouth like he can drag the rest out of me if he really wanted.

“I never...” I start again, quieter this time, and the admission is right there, a secret I can’t take back once I let it out.

Before I can get away, his arm clamps around my lower back, dragging me against his chest. His other hand finds my cheek, his thumb circling a path of fire across my skin.

“In all that time we spent together,” he lets the silence stretch, his thumb still branding my cheek, “did I ever give you the impression I’d put you in danger?”

My breath catches before I let it go, shaking my head. “No,” I answer honestly, twisting to get free of his arms. “But people are never as they seem.”

He pins me with a glare. “Clearly.”

My feet leave the floor as he hauls me up, my legs locking around his waist. He backs up until the table hits my lower back, setting me on its edge as the shelves close around us.

“But why the fuck...” His mouth brushes mine, tongue tracing my bottom lip. “...do you like monsters?”

“What?” I gasp.

Is he talking about Parker? What the fuck does he know?

He shakes his head, mouth pressed into a straight line.

“Asher.” It’s a plea. A plea to give me something. Anything. Before I either for real kill him or do something stupid that I might regret. Again.

“You have to trust me, Venom.” His gaze holds mine as his thumb drags across my collarbone and dips beneath the strap of my top. The touch is light, almost absent.

“You still wanna fight?” His finger traces my lower lip, then pushes into my mouth. “Or you gonna shut the fuck up and ride me?”

His shoulders ease back, and I clench my thighs to keep him from leaving. His mouth twitches, and I know he caught it.

Shadows darken the detailed planes of his face. “I’m fucking done playing house.”

My legs slowly part, the offering clear.

His mouth slams into mine, his teeth scraping as his tongue pushes deep. His fingers hook the waist of my yoga pants, yanking them down in one hard pull. The fabric slips over my skin and drops away, leaving me bare and open for his taking.

He steps back, drinking in every curve, like he’s deciding how much of me he can take before I break.

“Fucking perfection, Venom,” he says, voice rough.

This is what he does. Makes me see things differently. I’ve always been the one in control... my life, my marriage, every job I ever took. He strips me down until I’m empty, then penetrates every part of who I am. Every part where he already lives.

He peels off my bra and tosses it aside, and I bury my hands back in his hair, nails scraping his scalp as every circle of his hips grinds against me, his mouth working mine with controlled rhythm.

His teeth graze my jaw and trace a slow path to just below my ear, his knuckles skimming my collar before his fist closes around the choker and jerks me forward.

Rolling his tongue, he spits on my clit and the warmth of his saliva spreads through me.

“You’re exactly as I remember,” he groans into the crook of my neck. “All fucking mine.”

Pulling back, he nips at my lip and drops to his knees. I’m motionless, watching his mouth drag over me, his tongue flicking against my swollen knot of nerves.

“Asher,” I gasp, embarrassingly close to coming apart after a single lick.

I grind into the rhythm of his mouth, his inked skin shifting against my thighs. A finger slides inside me, circling tender as sweat soaks my skin, my orgasm threading tight and about to snap.

Then it breaks, ripping through me so hot I see white.

He stands to his full height, fingers wrapping around himself, stroking with deliberate patience, lips still wet from me. “You think I’m gonna make everything easy for you?”

I fist a hand in his hair, pulling his head back to expose the stretch of muscle in his neck. He groans, and it vibrates through me, landing right between my thighs.

Yanking him closer, I tighten my grip and ignore his laughing outburst. “I think, if you don’t fuck me, I’m sliding right off this table to go find your broth—”

He drives into me hard enough to arch my spine off the table, and a scream tears out of my throat.

His fingers bite into my hips as his mouth crashes over mine. “Shut up.” The words are rough against my lips. “It’s the last time you’ll ever use my brother—or any other man—in a sentence with you.”

His teeth catch my bottom lip.

“I mean it.”

“You didn’t answer.” I grind against him, chasing the friction until it sparks through every nerve. “And you’re damn lucky you feel this good, or I’d be pushing you away until you did.”

“Oh?” His tone darkens. “How good?”

God. That shouldn’t sound as hot as it does, with his eyes gone lazy and the hard line of his jaw cutting through the shadows.

“Like you belong there,” I whisper.

Every muscle in him locks.

My breath catches. “Like you were made for me.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. His rhythm turns merciless. Harder, not faster. *One more.*

“Like you’re mine.”

I barely get the words out before he takes them from me with his mouth. He drives into me again, grinding deep enough to make my vision blur, and the room narrows to nothing but the ruthless drag of his body against mine.

I’m climbing too high. Too tight. I know the fall is coming, and when it does, it’ll take the whole fucking room with it.

A growl vibrates between us.

I shatter.

My body locks around him, every pulse wrenching another broken sound from my throat. He catches each one with his mouth, swallowing them like he’s starving.

Then he pulls away, leaving me trembling and exposed to the cold and lowering me to the concrete. He settles between my thighs again, covering me with his weight.

Time stops.

He looks through me with eyes that feel like home—if home were a battleground, if safety came with blood on its knuckles. The dark rings around his blue irises have nearly swallowed the color, matching the shadows carved beneath his cheekbones.

His tongue sweeps over his lower lip.

“Mine.”

He kisses me again.

“Yours.” I’m too wrapped up in him to pretend otherwise. My body is already shaking, but he takes what I give him and demands more, keeping me open beneath him.

“And I’m fucking yours.”

His hips roll forward in one slow, relentless grind, and the words burn through me worse than the pressure. He holds me there until I feel branded by him—by the weight of him, the heat of him, the certainty in his voice.

I need this.

The ache. The soreness. The reminder of his hands and his mouth and the way he looks at me every time he claims me.

“Don’t ever question that shit again.”

My body answers before I can. I clench around him, dragging a ragged sound from somewhere deep and primitive. He licks it from my lips, smiling against my mouth. He knows exactly what he’s doing to me.

Every nerve in me detonates.

My legs shake, sweat slicking my skin. I lose the ability to do anything except hold on, but he doesn't let me escape the aftershocks. He keeps moving through them, slower, dragging me down from the edge one devastating tremor at a time.

His rhythm snaps.

He buries his face against my neck and shudders, the sound rumbling over my sternum. He comes apart completely. Grip tight, weight heavy, and breath ragged against my skin.

He stays there until the violence leaves his body.

When he finally slows, it drags a hiss from both of us, before he finally collapses beside me. We breathe in synch, both silent.

His skin burns wherever it touches mine. My body aches with the aftermath, every muscle loose and trembling, every thought fuzzy beneath the weight of him.

He still hasn't answered my question.

I still have a hundred more.

I turn toward him, but his arm catches me before I can get far, hauling me close.

His lips skim my cheek. "Stop being a brat."

Gripping my chin, he tilts my face up to his. "Stop."

He kisses me with slow, lazy strokes, turning his head until his tongue finds mine.

I break first, lips wet and swollen. "I think I know."

He smiles. I want to punch him.

"You do." He searches my face. "*So trust me.*"

He's making everything more complicated than it needs to be. Does he know Emeric has eyes and ears everywhere?

I crawl to the side, snatching his shirt and shoving it over my head before my feet hit the floor. So we have great sex and are borderline obsessed with each other. None of our issues are resolved. We're in the same place we were an hour ago.

Snow falls from the sky, blanketing the ramps in the backyard. I'm so lost in the beauty of it that words leave my mouth before I can catch them. "I don't know what part of you I should believe and what part I shouldn't."

He's silent. I'm not mad about that. We could probably do with the silence since we're dangerously close to the border of no return.

Asher's voice drops. "Venom."

My eyes close as the shudder of his tone rolls through me. I turn over my shoulder to find him leaning up on his elbow, abs rippling with every movement.

He holds my gaze, steady across the dim space between us.

“Believe the part where I fell in love with you when I shouldn’t have.” He tilts his head. “The part where you shot me but *missed*.”

Air leaves my lungs.

“The part where you *never* miss,” he adds.

The truth of what I’m about to say swells in my throat.

“Exactly,” I say softly, relief flooding through me. “I never miss.”

It’s the first time I’ve admitted it out loud. That I purposely veered to the right when I pulled the trigger. That I *purposely* didn’t deliver a kill shot.

Fingers braid with mine, and he pulls me back down beside him. He places a finger under my chin, looking between my lips and eyes.

“I won’t touch her again,” he says, and I go to turn away but his hold on my chin tightens, keeping me in place. “I won’t touch her again.”

An ache spreads through my body. Everything fucking hurts. “I hate you.”

His jaw flexes. “No, you don’t. And you hate that, because you know people are going to get hurt.”

Frustration wraps its ugly noose around my neck and I let out an exasperated growl. “So let them!” I feel zero guilt over how much I’ve risked just to finally have him for myself.

His expression hardens, splitting the conversation in half.

“You, Ivanya. You are the one who will get hurt.” A dark, sarcastic laugh slips from him. “Fuck, you really think I care about anyone else but you? If it weren’t your life on the line, I’d risk it. But I will *not* fucking risk you.”

Silence.

I try to absorb the words I didn’t know I craved, fall short, and sigh. “Asher, I kill people for a living. I’ve lived in danger all my life. You can’t protect me.”

This time, his chuckle stays in his chest. “I can and I will.”

I let him think what he needs because none of it matters.

Rolling onto my stomach, I rest my chin on his chest and trace his tattoos. “I’ve always thought this one reminded me of poison ivy.”

There's no way. Asher had this tattoo way before I met him.

"Mmm..." he muses, the corner of his lip twitching. "isn't that... strange."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ASHER

MY PHONE VIBRATES against the counter, and I already know who it is, so I snatch it up and head for the balcony. Cold air hits my bare chest as I lean on the railing, watching the ocean throw itself at the cliff below, relentless and too fucking dumb to quit.

Bit like me with Ivy.

“Your connection with Ivanya is becoming problematic,” they say, with a bit too much confidence.

Foam hisses across the rocks as a wave breaks apart.

“Not your concern.”

They’re weighing their next words, trying to soften whatever comes out as if it’s gonna make a difference. Spoiler, it won’t, but I’ll let them think it can because I’m generous. Or bored.

They speak again, voice dropping into that careful, measured tone. “I know it isn’t my concern.”

My jaw locks. “Exactly. So why the fuck are you calling?”

The line goes quiet before they finally answer. “Because I am requesting a timeline.”

“You can request whatever you want, but that doesn’t mean you get it.”

Static crackles through the speaker. “Are you getting attached to the girl.”

My lip twitches. “Smoke and mirrors.”

Nothing. They hate it when I talk back. They all fucking did, which is exactly why I love it so much.

“Need I remind you,” they say, spacing the words out like I can’t understand. “Just because you are who you are does not mean you get to play that same hand with us.”

I laugh, then let it die in my throat.

Us?

“How many times do I have to tell you? This, me, her... me...” I hiss, all smirk gone. “Are none of your business, and if you have a problem with that, feel free to crawl out of that cozy little hole and come tell me to my face.”

They blow out a breath. “You’re letting her compromise your judgment.”

“You wanna say that again?” I dare, grip tensing on my phone.

They don’t.

The wind picks up, salt and cold stinging my skin. Somewhere inside the house, a door opens and closes, footsteps padding across hardwood.

“She killed your father, Asher.”

I roll my eyes. “And it’s no secret he and I were never close.” My elbows drop to the railing. “In fact, I’d go as far as to say we hated each other.”

“True,” they mutter, and it’s the smartest thing they’ve said since inconveniencing me with this phone call. “But even then, he is blood. He deserves more respect than that.”

I pause. Should I bring this up? Is it gonna be worth it?

Fuck it. “Do you know who ordered the hit on him? Why he was on Mariée de la Mort’s wedding list to begin with?”

Fucker clears his throat, papers shuffling in the background.

“No, I don’t know. Why would I know?” Suspicion prickles through the line, and I wonder how the fuck they’ve managed to tiptoe through life convincing people they’re anything other than what they are.

I squeeze the phone. “No reason. Just wondering, is all...”

“Wondering what?” They snap. Fucking lucky they’re not in front of me.

“You know. Whether Ivy is in Le Boucher’s back pocket, since he’s the only one we know who’s fond of knocking leaders off.”

A burst of laughter. “Son, have you been snorting snow instead of shredding it? You give that woman far too much credit.”

“Huh,” I chuckle, watching her move through the dining room, stealing my fucking coffee. “Yeah, no doubt you’re probably right.”

I lean against the balcony door. “Was there anything else you needed? Or did you just wanna chat cocaine and killers?”

The pause drags. “You need to finish this vendetta. Now.”

My grip tightens, plastic creaking under my fingers. “I’m not killing her.”

They huff. “Yes, you are, because you’ve been contaminated by her, and you took an oath. A very long, ancient, sacred family oath.”

Heat floods my chest, my vision narrowing to the ocean below. “Need I remind you, since it’s clear you have amnesia, that I don’t run by the same rules you do. La Maison Du Mal is *me* and without *me* there would be no *you*, so next time you wanna call me quoting a fucking book I recited when I was four years old, I’d suggest you back the fuck up.”

They let it sit, long enough that I think they’ve hung up. “You need to let her go, Asher. Kill her.”

My thumb taps once against the phone’s edge. “Or?”

A tired exhale hisses through the speaker. “Precautions will need to be put in place.”

I end the call before they can say another word, phone sitting in the palm of my hand. What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

Precautions.

I’ve got two options and I know it. I either bend to what he wants, or...

I STRETCH my legs beneath the computer table, finger dragging across my upper lip. One thousand different ways this could go, and they all end the same. I just have to decide which path to take.

A knock breaks through the quiet.

“Come in.”

Ivy pushes it open, standing there in my old Winter Games shirt. It’s faded and worn, hanging off one shoulder and landing past her knees. She looks cute as fuck. Especially since her hair has that whole, just got fucked vibe going. I’ve always been obsessed with her hair. It’s so long and thick there’s more than enough to grab onto, which is a plus, since she won’t miss any if I end up accidentally tearing some out.

I smirk up at her, pushing back from the desk until the chair rolls far enough for her to see the invitation. She takes it, crosses the room without a

word, and climbs onto my lap.

Her knees press into the leather on either side of my hips, her weight settling against me as my hands fall to her thighs.

She drags her fingers into my hair, thumbs pressing slow circles against my temples.

Fuck. I could get used to this. Attempted murder aside...

My eyes roll closed and I groan.

Her nails drag across my scalp. "Are you okay?"

If I gave her the honest answer, she'd probably go round two with that *attempt*. The thought tugs at the corner of my mouth, and I don't bother hiding it. "You're wearing my shirt."

"Kind of never washed it either." Her response shouldn't surprise me, but it does. "Smells like you."

I grip her thigh. "You kept your dead ex-lover's shirt?"

"Lover?" she asks innocently, thumbs still working my tension apart thread by thread. "Or toy?"

My hand slides up under the hem of the shirt, landing on her hip. I press my thumb into the groove of it and her breath catches.

She watches me for a long moment. No venom, just Ivy. Those mint green eyes softening.

Mine.

"Who were you talking to earlier?" she asks, her gaze flicking to the laptop. Thank fuck for auto-lock or I'd be left explaining those cameras in her room.

I shrug. "Nobody worth mentioning."

With one arm bracing her back, I stand, and her legs lock around my waist. She drags a finger over the scar at my throat while I carry her downstairs. Typical Ivy, taking a moment she thinks I'm too busy to notice. She still hasn't asked about it. Figure she will eventually, and then what? What will I tell her?

As soon as we hit my bedroom, I lay her down over the white sheets. Her hands don't leave me. They slide from my neck to my jaw, before pulling me down with her.

My lips crash against hers. I'm fucking fighting a losing battle when it comes to her. Every time I try to starve out my feelings, they come back hungrier, more savage, willing to do just about anything to get what they want.

The kiss goes slow and deep. My tongue slides against hers, drawing a low sound from her throat that goes straight to my groin.

Her fingers spread flat across my chest, my heartbeat hammering into her palm. *Too fast. She'll know.*

"Ash," she whispers, and it cracks my chest wide open.

Nothing I want to answer right now. So I kiss her deeper, tilting her chin up with my free hand so I can get the angle I want, the one where her whole mouth softens against mine.

She arches beneath me, reaching, like she's trying to close a gap that has fuck all to do with space. Her hips lift, meeting the weight of me, and the shirt rides up her thighs.

My hand slides from her jaw to her waist, holding her there. *Mine.* The thought is a gut punch, and my forehead drops against hers.

For a second, everything stops. Just the two of us, suspended in the thick silence, our chests rising and falling out of sync. With every flicker of her pulse, every blink of her dark lashes hitting her cheeks, I know exactly what she's doing. She sees the wreckage I hide inside, and she's trying to fucking piece it back together. I fight the urge to look away, to fucking run, to ignore the twist in my gut telling me I can't do this.

Because I fucking *can't*.

She catches my face in both palms, and a sound escapes me.

Searching my eyes, she pulls herself closer. Her lips feather over mine, and I suck in a breath. Too fucking gentle for something that feels like my heart getting ripped out of my chest.

Tell her.

I kiss her instead, pulling the shirt over her head. My shirt.

She lifts her arms, helps me strip it off, and then she's bare beneath me except for black lace that's already damp when I drag my knuckles over her. She tries to work my shirt off with her feet, giving up and coming to her knees to drag it over my head.

Her mouth finds my tattoo, and my skin burns when I feel the soft slither of her tongue trace the lines that lead up my neck.

Fabric tears when I rip her underwear away and neither of us stops, her hands already shoving at my sweats, dragging them down over my cock. We're all desperate hands and tangled limbs, and I flatten her against the mattress with my fingers wrapped around her throat.

I shove her thighs wider with my own, dragging my heavy length straight over her slick clit, wetting every inch as her hips jerk up to chase the friction.

She reaches for me, but I catch her wrists, pinning them above her head with one hand. My free hand guides me to her entrance, and I groan when she throbs around my tip. Her hips tilt up, and my breath catches as I push in slow. So fucking slow it's almost torture.

Her mouth falls open on a gasp, and I cover it with mine, swallowing the sound as I fall deeper and deeper into her.

I bottom out and hold there, my forehead pressed to hers, breathing hard through my nose while her body adjusts around me.

"Ash," she whispers, the word a broken exhale.

I pull back until only the tip remains inside her, then slide back in just as slow, deep and deliberate, feeling every inch of her wrapped around me, every flutter of muscle trying to pull me deeper. I set a rhythm that has nothing to do with fucking and everything to do with possession.

Mine.

My tongue strokes hers, matching the drag of my cock inside her.

Her hands flex in my grip.

I release her wrists, her arms locking around me, nails digging into my shoulder blades as I rock into her, slow and unrelenting. The headboard knocks the wall with each thrust, the wet slide of our bodies the only other sound, and I grip the top of it to hold my rhythm.

Her legs wrap around my waist, heels pressing into my lower back, pulling me deeper. I groan into her mouth and she swallows it, kissing me harder. She fists my hair, holding me to her like she's afraid I'll pull away.

I grind, hitting an angle that makes her gasp against my lips. Her body arches, chest pressing against mine, nipples dragging across my skin. I shift just enough to get my hand between us, thumb finding her clit and circling.

She breaks the kiss on a moan, head tipping back into the pillow, and I bury my face in her neck, sucking at the skin there.

Nails scrape down my back.

I hiss, a second away from snapping.

"Don't stop," she pants, desperate.

I wasn't planning on it.

I keep moving, keep kissing her neck, her jaw, back to her mouth where she kisses me hungry and half-broken. My thumb presses harder against her

clit, circling faster now while my cock drags through her in long strokes that make her thighs tremble around me.

She clenches so tight I almost lose it, but I keep moving through her orgasm. Every thrust feels like I'm trying to fuck my way back through time to the moment before I lost her.

She falls apart under me, thighs shaking against my hips, her pussy gripping my cock in waves that almost take me with her.

I need to go slower before I rip us both apart.

Her hands cup my jaw, and she kisses me like she knows. Like she can taste the desperation on my tongue.

I pour everything I can't say into the slide of my mouth against hers. Every lie, every truth, the year I spent in hell learning how to hate her and failing at it.

Whimpers scatter over my lips, and I feel it everywhere, in my chest, my spine, the ache of my cock still buried inside her.

Shifting the angle, I ride her deeper, growling into her skin.

"I can't, Asher..." Her pleads are broken. Like me.

I kiss her harder, fuck her slower. Like if I just keep going... it'll fix us.

Every stroke makes her flinch and arch at the same time, thighs clamping then loosening then clamping again, like she wants to push away. I don't give her the choice, just keep moving, keep kissing her, keep drowning in the only thing that's ever felt real.

I come with her name caught in my throat, buried deep, hips stuttering as I empty inside her.

My arms give out, my chest dropping to hers as I press my face into the side of her neck and drag air into burning lungs.

Still trembling beneath me, she slides a shaking hand up my back and pulls me closer instead of away.

A few seconds pass, maybe ten, maybe a fucking lifetime, before she curls into me fully, one leg hooked over mine.

Her breathing evens out against my chest, her face tucked into my collarbone where every warm exhale hits my skin. I stay awake and listen to her sleep. Afraid if I stop, she'll disappear.

I watch her longer than I should. From the dark sweep of her lashes, to the faint twitch of her mouth. It's like she's trying to tell me everything I've been waiting to hear.

I need to fucking stop this shit.

Before I can talk myself into ruining more shit, my phone lights up on the nightstand. I stay still for a second, listening. Three full breaths, then I ease my arm out from under her neck, careful not to wake her.

She shifts, murmuring something that *doesn't* involve any buffed-up Marvel character but still makes my eyes narrow, then buries her face deeper into the pillow.

I grab the phone and tap the message open.

Come to my room. Now.

Camille has some fucking nerve.

I stare at the screen until it goes dark, my thumb hovering over the letter F.

Ivy's leg twitches against mine, and I look at her one more time. Then I slip out from beneath the sheets and grab my sweats, pulling them on without looking back, because if I do, I won't fucking leave.

The house is quiet as I take the stairs to the third floor. I stuck Camille at the far end of the hall, way the fuck away from me, next to the guest wing Ivy thought was my bedroom. Good thing she was fucking wrong, since I would have *for real* committed first-degree murder if those fuckers were in my bed with her.

Light spills through the cracked door of Camille's room, and I knuckle it further open.

Camille chuckles from near the window, silk robe falling down her body and a wine glass hanging from her fingers. She looks at me over her shoulder as I kick the door shut.

"I hope you've had fun with your little toy." She lowers her glass onto the table without looking away. "Because everything's about to change."

I cross my arms to keep my hands busy, because I don't trust that I won't kill her if she says some dumb shit about Ivy. "I don't have time for your shit, Camille, so spit it out so I can go back to fucking my *wife*."

Her features tighten around the hurt before relaxing into a sneer. I don't know what passes through that messed up head of hers, but whatever it is settles her enough to sit on the bench below the window. She crosses her leg, moving the silk to show more skin.

I don't look.

Clearing her throat, she pulls the robe back over herself, no doubt offended at my lack of interest. Not sure why. I've never hidden it from her.

"The first thing you're going to do is get rid of her."

My mouth opens, ready to cuss her all the way the fuck out, but she lifts her finger, cutting me off. "I'm not done."

She shifts backward. "You're going to tell her that your marriage isn't real, and that it was all a trick, and that you're in love with me."

My lip curls. "Is that so?"

"Really." She lifts her chin.

I glare at her.

"The second thing you're going to do is..." She leans forward, lowering her voice. "That thing you do that ensures she *stays* busy."

Everything in me goes still. *There's no fucking way.* But I don't have time to figure out her wordplay, and if I don't say something, she'll take it as confirmation.

I take a slow step deeper into her space. "You should know better than to think you sit at any kind of power, Camille."

She laughs, piercing through every sound barrier known to man, and lands right on my patience. "Oh, but I do. At least with this, and you know it."

"Get the fuck out," I snap.

She stands and has the audacity to close the distance between us like it isn't the only thing keeping her alive. "Oh, honey..." Her finger drags over my scar. "You know this is fate."

I whack her away. "That ain't fucking happening." My hand lands on her throat and I shove her up against the wall. "And if you had half a brain, you wouldn't fucking touch me again."

Tilting my head, I let my gaze drag over her face until she quivers under my palm.

"What I would give to end it here. To snap your frail little neck and call it a fucking day, but as you know..." I lower my lips to her ear and goosebumps spread over her skin. "I fucking can't."

I ram her against the wall and step away. "Yet."

Before I change my mind, I turn back towards the door and slam it closed, leaning against it for a second to remind myself she isn't worth the shit show killing her would create.

"You ok?" My head snaps toward the end of the hall. Khloe. Fuck. I forgot she was on this side of the house.

I flash a smile at her, a genuine one. "Yeah." It's the one I only use for her, Ivy, my mom, and fans. For everyone except *everyone*. "It's gonna be."

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

IVY

AN HOUR. An hour explaining everything that's changed this fast while I whisk batter that's *way* too thick to pass as edible.

"You're stirring it wrong." Luce leans into her screen, her face filling the frame.

Why am I explaining anyway? Shouldn't they be pleased he hasn't killed me? "I'm stirring it fine."

Luce mumbles. "You're going to get lumps."

"Then I'll eat the lumps." I drag the spoon through again, and the batter slaps the side of the bowl.

Jord tilts his head, squinting at his screen. "Is that Asher's shirt?"

I glance down at the faded black cotton like I just noticed it and hadn't been secretly wearing it the whole year I thought he was dead. *Ice Butcher* stretches across the chest in cracked lettering. It smells like him, which is exactly what I'm *not* about to say out loud.

I shrug like it's nothing. "It was on the floor and I needed a shirt."

"Suuuure," Jord drags out the syllables. "*Lots* of things end up on floors."

Tilting the bowl, I pour enough into the cast iron. "Exactly. A common occurrence. Painfully normal."

Luce rests her chin in her hand. "How are you holding up. Actually."

Steam hisses from the waffle iron as I lower the lid. "I've called Emeric seventeen times."

Both their faces go blank.

“Seventeen,” Jord repeats, mostly to himself.

“Seventeen.” I confirm, holding the entire red flag with confidence. “There has been no answer. Not even a decline. Just rings out and dumps me to voicemail.” I press my thumb into the counter until my nail whites out. “He loved Nonna. He has to know. He *has* to.”

“Maybe he does know.” Luce picks at the edge of her sleeve. “Maybe that’s why he’s not answering.”

No way that’s it. “Maybe.”

I lift the waffle iron lid and peel the first one free, burning my fingers for my trouble.

Jord’s eyes narrow as he leans closer to the screen. “I swear women don’t feel heat.”

The backyard slider slams shut, and Camille steps into the kitchen, wrapped in Lululemon. Her body is what every beauty standard bowed to when I was a teenager, and back then, I probably would’ve done anything to have it. Thank fuck, I grew into the curves genetics dumped on me.

She stops when she notices me, her body locking tight, then lifts her chin and heads for the fridge. She pulls a bottled water, presses the cold plastic to her throat for a second, then twists off the cap. With every gulp of water, she keeps zeroing in on me, dragging her eyes over what I’m wearing as if Asher is fucking hers.

“Aw.” Her tone is about as sweet as Splenda. “Don’t you look domesticated.”

“Good morning,” I reply, baring every tooth in a smile. I’ll never let this bitch know she gets under my skin.

“Asher came by last night, by the way.” She tips the bottle back for another slow pull. “After you fell asleep.” One shoulder lifts in a tiny shrug, then drops. “You know how he is. He can’t ever really just leave things alone.”

Ice slides through the middle of my chest, but I don’t let it hit my face. I check the waffle iron instead, then drag my eyes back to her.

“Good for him.” I flatten my tone, and it pisses her off because she doesn’t move, too hungry to see any tiny involuntary crack that tells her she got me. So I give her nothing.

“Anyway.” She screws the cap back on the bottle, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder. “Just thought you’d want to know.”

“I didn’t,” I say pleasantly beneath my breath. “But thanks.”

Her footsteps scrape over concrete.

One. Two. Three. Inhale... exhale...

Snow hits the window above. So cold.

The snap of a million icicles biting into your sweaty flesh as you plunge under water.

“Ivy.” Luce’s voice drags me back.

I pluck another waffle out, ignoring the steam biting my fingers. “What?”

There’s a pause. “You’re looking a little *Mariée de la Mort*...”

The waffle thuds onto the plate. “I’m fine.” I suck batter off my thumb, bending over my phone. “I’ll call you guys back.”

”—wait!”

I tap end call and flip off the power switch, scooping up the plate with fresh waffles before crossing the kitchen to his door.

It clicks shut behind me.

He looks so peaceful asleep. Lately, all I ever see is him pressed. Grumpy. Pissed off at me. When he’s not fucking me, at least.

Now he’s here, shirtless and flat on his back, one arm thrown over his head, sheets tangled at his waist. His chest rises and falls, jaw slack. I take this moment to admire him, all that dark ink, thick muscle, and his stupidly adorable face when he’s not talking.

I take a waffle, set the plate on the dresser, and cross the room. As soon as I’ve hit the side of the bed, I drop it onto his face.

He jerks upright, snatching it away. With bed hair and eyes still lazy from sleep, I need to rein in my hormones before I climb onto his dick instead of threaten to cut it off.

“The fuck...” He looks down at his hand. “Did you just throw a waffle at me?”

“I placed it,” I say, nodding. “Gently. On your face.”

His eyes narrow.

“You’re awake now, so...” I fold my arms. “Camille says you fucked her last night. After I fell asleep.” Okay, she didn’t say those exact words, but she may as well have.

The annoyance in his face breaks into a smug smirk.

He laughs. “Yeah, right. Bitch is lying.”

“That’s your denial?” I stare at him. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” He doesn’t blink. “She’s lying.”

I've studied human nature. How people react under pressure, threatened, afraid. I've learned to look at what they don't say, not what they do, and everything in between.

He keeps glaring at me.

"What is it, Venom?" He bites into the waffle, slowly shuffling back against the headboard. "Am I lying? Or is she?" His chewing slows around his grin.

"You're an asshole." And a hot one. Unfortunately.

He sucks the grease from his thumb. "Mmm, but you used to love that about me."

Yeah... until you turned cruel.

He yanks me onto the bed before I can pull back, rolling over me and pinning me into the mattress.

God, he doesn't fight fair. I know she's lying. Or at least, his reaction tells me there's *some* lie buried in it.

"Let me go." A smile breaks over my face and I want to slap it off.

He looks straight into my eyes. "No."

My laughter dies, and suddenly, my chest is too tight, this room is too small, and I'm beneath the only man walking this earth who can touch the scars I hide in my soul.

He brushes his nose against mine, then kisses me, shifting back a little after dropping two more.

I search his face, wondering if I'd still be a good human lie detector if the lie itself was the only real thing I've ever felt.

"Who were you talking to yesterday?" I try again, because this isn't leaving my head.

"Nobody worth mentioning," he repeats, kissing me again.

"You said that last night," I say around his lips. "When I asked in the office."

"Yeah." He nips down my jaw, tracing the marks with his tongue. "Because nobody worth mentioning is *still* nobody worth mentioning."

"Asher..." I say, but it comes out breathless and my eyes drift closed.

"Ivy," he mimics, voice vibrating over my neck.

I chuckle when he bites my skin, shoving at his chest with everything I have until I roll onto my side.

He groans but lets it happen, landing on his back with his arm still trapped beneath me.

It gives me a direct, daylight view of the scar on his neck. The closer I look, the more I see. People don't answer hard questions by being asked. Most times, you have to prod around the surrounding details before you can get to the center.

"How did you get out?"

He looks up at the ceiling. "Out of what."

"You know what." And sometimes, you have to tie them to a chair and torture it out of them. I'm not above that option.

He swallows. "It doesn't matter."

I push on. "It matters to me."

He snorts, shaking his head. "It fucking shouldn't."

"What are you talking about?" I snap, failing to bury my annoyance. "You've always mattered to me."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Because how fucking dare I. I don't get to say shit like that to a man I tried to kill. Or at least, he thought I tried to kill.

"Venom." He drags a hand down his face, fingers pressing hard into his eyes. "Leave it alone."

Is he insane? I can't let this go. There are a hundred questions I haven't even begun to ask because I've been marinating in my guilt over what I did.

"I can't."

His jaw tenses, and the part I love most about him disappears under my questions.

"You're gonna need to."

Fine. We tried the codex way. New plan.

"The scar. On your throat."

Nothing.

Every muscle in my body pulls tight. "Who's Dovecrest? What Elea said at dinner?"

He shoves himself upright, the sheets pooling at his waist. "I ain't doing this with you right now, Ivy. Give up."

Heat prickles over my scalp.

"What happened after, Asher?" I push up off the pillow. "How did you get out of the house? People don't just resurface with a scar on their throat—"

"Ivy." One simple word and my mouth snaps closed.

He pulls on his sweats and I plant myself in place instead of getting lost in how hot my scratch marks look over his back. "I'm not doing this."

"Then what are we doing?" I ask, and ugh! I hate that. I hate I asked it. "Because every time I think hey, we're making sense, some shit comes in and reminds me why I can't have the one fucking thing I've ever wanted!"

"Don't." He turns, and there it is. That cold, detached look I've despised since he's been back. "Don't make me answer shit I can't."

I stare at him.

He stares back.

Neither of us moves.

Fine. Fucking fine.

Torture won't earn back his trust, so I fly off the bed, cross the room, and grab my phone when I pass. There are exactly two things I know how to do when people shut doors in my face. I find the key. Or I shoot the fucking hinges off.

As soon as his bedroom is at my back, I stand there for a second, phone in my hand, waiting. Listening. For footsteps. For the low sound of his voice calling my name through the stone, or the handle turning, or any of the hundred small surrenders I've watched people make when they realize the other person left and they need to chase them.

None of it happens, because this isn't a fairytale. Asher is the villain the princess fantasizes about while having polite sex with her prince.

Back in my room, I peel off the shirt and toss it to the floor. The shower's hot when I step in, and I scrub hard, fast. Maybe it'll give me a minute to change my mind about what I'm about to do.

Or maybe it'll give me a minute to fix the plan...

Stepping out, I dry off and pull on the first pants I find. Leggings. Doc Martens. An oversized jean jacket.

The hall is quiet when I leave, and I fix on where I'm headed. There's a door on the other side I haven't seen anyone use, so I walk that way, keeping it casual. If someone sees me, I won't look like I'm about to do something I shouldn't.

I put my hand on the handle. It opens easier than I expect, and I slip inside, finding a switch on the wall. The fluorescent lights flicker overhead, then settle on a line of expensive cars.

"Huh."

Keys hang off hooks on the wall. I curl my finger beneath the one with the Aston Martin badge, press the unlock button, and head straight for it.

Leather wraps around me the second I drop into the seat, and I drag my palms over the steering wheel as if greeting an old friend. Well, a similar one anyway.

The engine purrs to life with a purr. Damn. I sure hope he wasn't expecting me home for dinner...

I hit the garage button, and the doors roll open, spilling daylight across concrete. Shifting into drive, I ease forward but lose patience and floor it. The Aston surges, tires biting at ice-covered concrete as the curve of the driveway comes fast.

I take it at speed, hook the steering wheel until the back eases into a drift, then correct onto the road that joins the driveway.

Through the rearview, I watch the house shrink every few seconds. I really didn't think I'd make it out that easy, but I don't let it go to my head. With Asher, it only ever means one of two things. He knows and he'll deal with you later, or he'll deal with you later.

The road narrows fast, snowbanks crowding both sides as pines close in overhead, and then everything smooths into nothing. Which isn't ideal, because now there's nothing to distract me from my straying thoughts.

Why isn't Emeric answering my calls or texts?

I hit the music button and an old rock song fills the void. The road climbs through dense bushland, and then finally, I drive through a break that opens to white peaks. The familiar small township sprawls across the slopes, tucked into mountains.

Easing off the gas, the Aston rolls quietly through town as my fingers tap the wheel. Memories threaten to surface, and before they can piss me off, I crank the wheel and swing back onto the main road.

Trust Le Boucher.

Why would she think I wouldn't? I know Emeric. I know what he built. I know what he pulled me from and what he made of all the broken parts.

I press the gas harder, and the road opens onto familiar territory as I guide the car down Veilarath Lane. Toward Mount Grim.

The tightness finally releases from my muscles when I pull up in front of wired gates. "Home."

CHAPTER TWENTY

IVY

I ROLL to a stop outside 888 Veilarath Lane. I haven't been back here since it happened. Couldn't bring myself to do it, even though it's the only place I've ever felt at home in, Désamour aside.

My phone vibrates in the center console, and I scroll through the texts.

Luce: You're there, aren't you?

Punk: Where? I can't access shit from this tower! Don't do anything stupid...

I am. I stole his car.

Punk: LOL

Cold air hits my lungs as I shove the car door shut and stare up at the house. I remember standing right here years ago, that deed heavy in both hands. I found it intimidating to take in at first, what with all its towering spires and baroque flourishes. 888 Veilarath Lane was built to remind everyone exactly where they belong. Beneath it.

Naturally, I loved it the moment I saw it. I still love it, even if everything inside has been poisoned by memory.

My boots hit the same steps, but now everything's changed.

The door swings open. "Frau Ivanya!" Jasper fills the frame, flour dusted across his forearm and a canvas duffel over his shoulder. His face splits wide as he rattles off a string of German, too fast for me to catch it all, but I get the bones.

The heating system works.

The pool filter was replaced.

The guest house roof got patched after the last storm.

I laugh, hugging him. "Hey, Jasper. You heading off?"

"Ja, holiday. One month. Back to Munich." He taps his chest twice.

"My distant aunt, she is seventy this year. Big party."

I squeeze Jasper's arm. "Tell her happy birthday from me."

He nods, already moving, but stops. "Everything is good here. The garden, I will have someone come."

My throat swells. "Go, Jasper. Enjoy it."

I turn back to the open door and breathe in deep. This will be fine. So what if I've been dodging this place since everything went to shit. Asher is alive now.

Before I can enter into the house fully, the deep snarl of an expensive engine rolls up the driveway, and despite my better judgment, I glance over my shoulder.

A familiar matte black McLaren parks behind the Aston, and Asher climbs out in gray sweats and a black hoodie, with a pair of Jordans tied loose at his feet.

Pale eyes land on me, darkening and holding me there long enough for me to know he's pissed.

He drags his gaze to Jasper, and all that anger melts into that boyish grin he's famous for. Huh. He's the biggest fucking play of all.

"Jasper, my guy." He clasps his hand, yanking him into one of those one-armed grip-hug things men do. "How's the boiler holding up?"

Jasper lights up. "Fixed. New valve, new pump. No more banging in the walls at night."

Asher continues. "And the cabana fireplace?"

"Runs perfect. I replaced the ignition switch myself." Jasper taps his temple. "YouTube."

Asher laughs. "Legend."

I watch it unfold from the top step. Why are they talking back and forth about maintenance issues like Asher owns this house and not me?

Jasper gestures toward the Aston Martin. "She drove your car here, yes?"

Asher looks up at me. The grin doesn't fade, but the warmth behind it does. "Yeah." He pats Jasper's shoulder. "Does that surprise you?"

“No!” Jasper chuckles, continuing on his way. When it’s finally just Asher and me, I turn my back to him and enter the house, dumping the keys on the coffee table in the living room as the door clicks shut behind him.

This was the room where we had our *almost* first kiss.

“What do you want from me?” I ask, ignoring the kitchen on purpose. I keep my focus on the fireplace, but then I’m reminded of the night he ordered takeout...

This is why I never came back here.

“And what is this place? Veilarath, I mean?” I lower to the sofa. “Is the house we’re staying in the one you were waiting to be built?”

When he doesn’t answer, I lift my eyes to his. I shouldn’t have, because now I have to multitask to not completely fall apart. *Weak, weak, weak.*

Every second drags like an hour as he lowers down the steps and takes the spot opposite.

Another second.

He rests his head back against the sofa, eyes pinned on the ceiling. “I loved you.”

The words hit me right in the chest. “I...”

He shakes his head, cutting me off. “Don’t say shit until you’ve heard what I have to say.”

He shifts forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs.

Tension snaps through the room like a live wire, then his shoulders cave with a sigh and his head drops into his hands. The sound he makes is barely human.

My knees hit the floor and I cup his face, thumbs dragging along the rough line of his jaw.

“Hey.” I’ve never seen him like this. “Hey, look at me.”

He pulls back, hands rising to push me away, but I hold on until his fingers go slack.

“None of it matters.” I keep my voice low. “I know who you are. You know what I do for a living, remember? Whatever you think I can’t handle — you know I’ve handled worse.”

His mouth twitches, one corner lifting before it drops. His eyes settle on me, freezing my next breath halfway in.

He swallows, brows pinched tight. “There’s a saying where I come from. *Les amants maudits.*” His lips part, closing again as he leans back in

the chair. The wood groans under him as he drags a finger over his upper lip, taking his sweet fucking time.

“Asher.” I squeeze his thigh. “Your fucking manspread has officially failed as a distraction. Speak.”

“Hmph.” He smirks behind his hand, pitching his weight forward again. “What I’m about to tell you doesn’t leave this room. Not a text. Not a call. Not even to Luce or Jord.”

“Okay.”

His broad shoulders lock. “I mean it, Ivy. Not a fucking word.”

I squeeze his thigh. “I said okay.”

He searches my face for something. Trust, maybe. Or the absence of a lie. Whatever he finds loosens his jaw enough to speak.

“My family isn’t who you think.” He drags both hands down his face. “I am who I am, yeah, but there’s more.”

Another pause.

I blink, resting on my heels. “I figured as much.”

“What?” His tone lightens, a brow arched. “No disappointment?”

I force back a laugh. “Would be a bit hypocritical, don’t you think?” The heaviness in my heart weighs down my smile. “Explain.”

Clearing his throat, he cracks his neck. “We’ll start with Veilarath.”

It’s not like the thought never crossed my mind, especially after finding out we were back here, but an hour ago, he didn’t want to say anything at all. What changed?

He continues. “My ancestors were one of the founding families who discovered Veilarath.”

“Mount Crow?” The folklore he told me when I first came, and how the mountains were named after each founding family and what each of them means.

His eyes darken. “Mine.”

Pretty sure he wasn’t just talking about the mountain.

I think back through time, to when Punk dug through the history of Veilarath and came back with the same polished story everyone gets, a winter resort country open to everyone, so long as they follow a particular set of rules.

His hand flexes at his side. “Say something.”

I take in the pale line across his throat. “Your scar?”

He touches it with a smirk. “An old family tradition. A blood rite, if you will.”

His eyes go in and out of focus before resting back on me.

“When you met me, I was already who I am, Ivy. Fuck. I still am.” He shakes his head with an exhale. “Then my father died, and I took his seat as Le Parrain.”

I need a drink, or twenty, and I need to stop looking so obvious when all I can think about is Parker fucking Lee.

“Le Parrain?” Saying the words out loud does nothing to make them make sense. “Meaning The Godfather?”

Meaning *French*.

Parker... French? No. There’s no way he had any connections there or I would know about it. We would all know. Was I *his* play all along? Did he know all along? Too late to ask him now, since I certainly didn’t miss *that* shot.

“Aléia and my father had been pushing me and Camille together since we were fucking children.”

Figured. Arranged marriage makes more sense when I think back.

“Camille’s mother and my father cut a contract before either of us could walk. Her daughter would marry into our line. The two families would merge and, in simple terms, create a power dynamic no one could fuck with.”

I don’t have time to figure this out right now and if I think too much into it, I’m going to be sick.

“So you never planned to marry her?”

His eyes widen like he’s already stated the obvious. “Never. Her mother’s *maison* is one of the founding bloodlines. When I was younger, I didn’t give a fuck. I’d do what I had to do to keep the dynamics of La Maison du Mal moving, just like my grandfather did, and my grandmother, and her grandfather...”

He shrugs like it’s nothing. Like he’s not telling me something I feared from the start.

“I never really cared who I’d end up with. My job was simple, as a...” His left eye twitches. “...Delacroix. Control the narrative. Implant ourselves in circles that no one can get into.”

I raise a brow. “So you sit with the assholes who have too much money and waste all their time doing weird shit?”

He glares at me like I'm stupid. "No, Ivy. I'm talking about circles that money couldn't buy you into. I'm talking about respect. Respect is the only currency that matters. Money? The circles you're thinking of are spineless. They have nothing else to offer. Money is far easier to earn than respect."

A chuckle catches in my throat. "Touché."

Then it dies, and I shake my head. "So, what does that mean? The snowboarding?" Realization dawns down on me. "Fame."

Asher nods. "Yeah, and before my father, my grandfather, and before him, and so on. We have to remain relevant in the public eye enough to not draw too much attention but also be talented in something to be worth the clout."

"And your father?" I ask, even though I hate how the words feel when they leave me.

Parker wasn't good for anything.

"A disgrace."

I sit back further, hands sliding off his thighs. When Aléia said Parker was Asher's father, the worst scenario was *what if he was just like him*. I didn't prepare for this.

"This is why you couldn't leave her," I whisper, the words more for myself than for him.

"That's why I *can't* leave her," Asher corrects, and seconds pass between us as I sit with his words, tossing them around in my head until they weigh nothing. "There's more."

He tilts his head, showing more of his face beneath the rim of his hood. "Someone's been killing our leaders for over a decade. Eleven years, Ivy. Eleven years of people at the top of La Maison du Mal being picked off one by one. The only real pattern is power. Guy's got a God complex."

I fold my arms tighter, trying to keep up and hating that I can't.

"I don't know enough about any of this to have a real thought on it yet, but..."

His eyes land on me. "They think whoever's doing this, they think it's the same person who killed Nonna."

Every other thought in my head dies on impact.

I lift my chin. "Who? Who do they think it is?"

Sinking deeper into his chair, he drags his tongue across his lower lip before he answers. "They call him Le Boucher Sans Loi."

The Lawless Butcher.

Everything caves in and I can't breathe.

I keep my face blank, chest pulling tight no matter how hard I clamp down on it, because this is what I trained for. This moment. The possibility that someone would make me, Emeric, and the rest of our family.

I push up from the floor, needing space, needing anything that isn't this air pressing in on me. The walls blur and I stumble toward the stairs, climbing faster when I hear mumbling behind me.

Shit. Nothing in my training covered this. The person who Made us being the one person I can't lie to. *This is why the Codex exists. So you never end up here.*

As soon as I hit the master, I head straight for the window that overlooks the backyard. Mount Crow stares back at me with snowcapped tips and dark rocks.

The door clicks closed.

"Are you going to run?" he asks, way too smooth for my panic.

I should run, but he knows I won't. You don't put out fire by running from it.

Every scar on my back prickles, as if I needed the reminder of why they're there.

My fingers find the choker that's forged around my neck. "No."

As much as I love this man, I know that his love is going to eventually kill me. I may be venom, but he's the fucking antidote.

"Damn." His knuckles trace the nape of my neck. "That's too bad."

I whack his hand away and spin around, but he catches me by my chin, forcing me still.

"The fucked-up thing about all of this, Ivy? You're in so deep that you haven't stopped and looked around. I mean, really looked around."

His hand falls back to his side before he settles onto the edge of the mattress.

Finally, he lifts his head. "How many times have you been in love?"

I clench my teeth. "What?"

"Answer the question."

I shrug. "None."

He pins me with a glare. "Try again."

I clear my throat. "Once."

The corner of his mouth tips upward, clearly pleased with my answer, before he stands from the bed. "The problem is that love and trust don't go

hand in hand.”

What is he talking about?

“Asher...”

“Shut up,” he chuckles, shaking his head. “I never trusted you, Ivy. But where I don’t trust your intentions, you don’t trust my motives. For whatever reason, we’re both stuck in a fucking place we can’t move out from, yet any time you walk in a room, I want you. Every single fucking time, and that’s never gonna change.”

He traces the contour of my cheek.

“How’d you get out?” I repeat, trying again since he’s being so open.

“Fuck, I just...”

“...how’d you get out?” I challenge, voice hardening.

His eyes snap to mine. “I crawled. And then I spent a year locked up in a facility talking myself into killing you.”

I shiver, goosebumps spreading over my skin. Out of all the possibilities, that wasn’t the one I thought he would say.

“Dovecrest,” I say, thinking back to that night. “Probably should have just done it. Would have been over quicker.”

He gives me that crooked grin. “But this way is so much more fun?”

“And Aléia?” I need to stay focused. “She was there?”

His fingers knead my neck, forcing my forehead to his. “You’re asking the wrong questions, Venom.”

This is him again. The battle between dark and light forever at war behind his eyes.

What happened to you.

My pulse spikes.

Could he know...

“What’s wrong?” His head tilts, thumb tapping the vein on my neck.

“Nothing.” I relax my shoulders.

His jaw tightens. “Ivy.”

“I said nothing.” I step back, needing the distance, needing room to think because my brain is firing in seventeen directions and none of them lead somewhere safe.

I know he’s watching me. Since he dropped Le Boucher’s name, Asher will be watching every micro-expression, every breath that comes half a second too late.

He knows. He has to know. Why else would he tell me?

This is a test. Has to be. He's been watching me since the wedding, since Désamour, since fuck knows when. Every soft moment, every cracked-open conversation, every time he pulls me close and I let him. All of it fed into some larger calculation I haven't cracked yet.

I need to fucking ground myself.

His face changes, all warmth draining from him until those pale eyes go flat and distant. I know it because I wear the same look every time I choose the job over everything else.

I turn before the guilt can finish climbing up my throat.

"Ivy." His voice hardens.

"Asher..." I mimic without stopping.

I need to get away... space... the mountain.

"Don't, Venom..." One word. All it takes is one damn word and I'm ready to reconsider everything.

I stop, staring at the wall and thinking over the options laid out in front of me.

He knows. He has to know.

Does he? Does he think I'm running back to Emeric to tell him? *Am I?* I did the first time he tried to tell me...

Every organ in my body turns to ice.

I spin back around slowly, closing the distance between us in three steps, grabbing the front of his hoodie with both fists. God, this fucking hurts. Everything between us sits seconds from crushing us both. The secrets, the lies, the games.

"I know..." I choke on the words, unable to give him any more.

He angles his head a little, and it's enough to push me forward.

"I know..." I force out, the burn in my throat swallowing half of it. "Who Le Boucher Sans Loi is."

Asher goes still.

If I don't spew it all out, it's going to keep rotting. "I know who's been hunting your family for eleven years."

My hands slip, falling to my sides. "I know because I think I helped him."

"Who?" He comes closer.

I hold his stare. "It's Emeric, Asher. My boss."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ASHER

I GLARE at myself in the mirror. Eyes dead, blood drying on my lip, and her words playing on repeat in my head.

Leaning forward, I spit in the sink and then wash it down, my head pounding with her words.

It's Emeric. My boss.

I helped...

There's a light knock on the door, and my grip on the faucet tightens until the pipes groan under my hand. I had to get the fuck away from her before I did something I couldn't take back.

Another knock.

"Fuck off."

"Asher, please..." Ivy's voice tugs at my rage, and I swing the door open to find her standing there, eyes rimmed red, hair a mess, and fucking lip quivering.

How'd we get to this point?

"You want to know what this was?" I lean on the basin. I want to see her take these words, swallow them, choke on them—fucking whatever. "A job."

Her brows pinch. "What?"

"You heard me." I shove myself through the doorway and into the bedroom. "I needed to know who was taking out La Maison. Needed a name. Needed a face. Couldn't exactly walk up and ask." I shrug, grabbing my shirt off the chair, and yanking it over my head.

“What about before—” she starts to say, and the laugh that leaves me is vile.

“Fake.” I turn back to her. “The whole thing. Everything.” I hold her stare and don’t blink. “You think I’d fucking love you?”

Her mouth opens, and then closes, as all the color drains from her face.

“I needed you close.” I hear my own voice go flat and I let it stay there. “Needed to see who you answered to. Who gave you Parker’s name. And you told me. Eventually.”

Her eyes land on mine. “I told you because I trusted you. Because you told me—” she blinks, as if just remembering something. “Nonna. I saw the blood of the sniper. I saw, and you said...”

I smirk. “The sniper is alive.”

Her lips part, and I see the raw truth of it, because as much as Ivy thinks she can mask her feelings, she can’t. At least not from me.

“But you want to know how.” There are too many ways I can hurt this woman, and only one that will work. “I put a round through his shoulder from fourteen hundred meters in pitch black with a crosswind pushing east.”

My eyes narrow, prodding her to catch on. “Fourteen hundred meters, Ivy. No night vision. No spotter.” I pause, letting the math do its own work. “And I still managed to miss every kill zone in his body by a clean six inches.”

She trips over her own feet when she steps back, her eyes wide and glassy. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” I jerk back with just enough sarcasm.

“You’re lying.” Louder now, her hand hitting the doorframe. “Because I know you. The before you—”

“People like us fake everything.” I raise my hands. “That’s the job, Ivy.” Fatigue squeezes out the last words. “You already *know* that.”

She changes her mind, crosses back into the room in four steps and shoves me, both palms flat against my chest.

I don’t move.

She shoves me again, harder, and a sound tears out of her throat that isn’t quite a cry and isn’t quite a sob.

“Then finish it!” She screams, veins swelling in her neck. “If that’s what this is, if I’m just a loose end, then finish it. Do it right now. Stop dragging

it out and just—”She must notice the bored expression on my face, because she stops.

I let the silence hang heavy for a moment, staring through her like she’s fucking nothing. “Get out of my house.”

She blinks up at me wide-eyed and breathless.

I lean in closer. “Now.”

Ivy

His bedroom door clicks shut behind me, and I flatten my palm over my sternum as if it can stop my heart from beating out my chest. The world spins too fast to hold onto, so I start counting because numbers make sense and this whole fucking situation doesn’t.

One, two, three, four.

Emotional compromise leads to operational failure. Identify the threat. Neutralize the threat. If the threat is internal, compartmentalize. Seal it off. Lock it down.

My hands shake against my shirt, so I curl them into fists, breathing slowly until the tremors ease. Turning the handle, I push into my room.

The second the door closes, I head for the closet and drag out the suitcase I packed after Désamour. I shove the last of my things inside, zip it closed, and stand, giving the room one last look—the rumpled sheets, the cage I thought had me trapped—before heading for the exit.

“Ivy?” Khloe stops when she sees me coming out, her eyes dropping to the suitcase. “What’s happening? What did he—”

“Nothing,” I say, managing a smile that dies halfway there. “It was nice meeting you, Khloe.”

My shoulder brushes hers as I pass, ignoring her voice behind me. There are others at the edge of my vision, though I don’t care enough to look. Also, if I catch Camille smirking, I might accidentally finally kill her this time.

Daniel’s already beside the black SUV, one hand holding the back door open, those frown lines carved deep between his brows. Seeing him loosens the knot in my chest.

I slide into the backseat, cold leather biting the backs of my thighs as I press my forehead to the window, dragging my palm over my cheek.

Wet. Still wet.

Daniel settles behind the wheel without a word, starting the engine as gravel crunches beneath the tires.

My phone buzzes against my lap. I almost ignore it. *Almost.*

Emeric

My thumb hovers, then taps.

New job. Details incoming. Are you ready?

I stare at the screen until the letters blur. Then I type.

Nonna is dead. I've called you seventeen times. Seventeen.
And you send me a job?

Three dots appear. Disappear. Appear again.

I know she's gone. I haven't come to terms with it and I don't want to talk about it.

I grind my teeth until pain shoots through my jaw, gripping the phone hard enough to make the case creak. I want to hurl it through the windshield and scream that she bled out in my arms, that she told me to trust him, that he'd keep me safe.

Will you take the job?

I swipe my cheeks one last time, rubbing all the evidence of my heartbreak away.

Yes. Give it to me.

Because fuck Asher Delacroix. The only way I know how to move on is by turning myself off.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ASHER

She's gone.

I've tried everything and nothing is working. I'm running out of ideas. Out of patience. Not for her, but for everyone else.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IVY

IT DOESN'T MATTER how many times I clean. I still see the blood, still remember the weight of my gun and the absolute fucking regret. *I wish he'd died.*

One month. That's how long I've spent convincing myself I'm fine while his ghost follows me from room to room. I thought I was clever, auctioning the place off at some charity gala, but the joke landed squarely on me when the buyer never contacted my lawyers. So what do I do? Move in. Because where better to rot than the one place that still feels like home?

I bite into a carrot, humming along with the bass pounding through the speakers while Alexa reads the day's news.

Mount Crow fills the window, stopping my hand above the pot. Goosebumps rise along the back of my neck.

Glancing over my shoulder, I find the little red dot tucked into the corner of the room and flip it off.

My smirk barely dies before the front door swings open and Devon walks in carrying a bouquet of sunflowers. The bright yellow petals are almost offensive against the muted tones of the entryway.

Devon is tall, broad shouldered with a narrow waist, and has blonde hair that looks dirty even though I know he showers twice a day. He's handsome, with blue eyes and—*Blah, blah, blah.*

"Honey, I'm home." He waits, grin spread wide.

I set down the knife and cross the kitchen to meet him, rising on my toes to press a kiss to his stubbled cheek. "How was the flight?"

Devon sets the flowers on the counter and shrugs out of his jacket, hanging it on the hook by the door. "Meeting was fine, the trip itself wasn't."

"Poor baby." I turn back to the cutting board, resuming my chopping. Celery next. Then onions. "Must be hard, staying in five-star hotels and drinking champagne with export executives. Switzerland is beautiful. One of my most favorite places."

He kisses my neck, wrapping an arm around my stomach. "I didn't know you'd been?"

I pause, hesitating. *Whoops*. That was fucking sloppy.

"The champagne was Dom Pérignon. And the executives were boring as shit." His hand lands on my waist, and he pulls me back into him. Devon loves to be touchy. A lot. Kind of miss the part about Parker where he fucking despised me as much as I did him.

"I missed you." His groan vibrates through my body.

I hum, noncommittal, and pop another carrot into my mouth.

When I don't answer, he brushes his lips over my ear. "Did you miss me?"

No. "Obviously."

Devon laughs against my neck, before he releases me to grab a beer from the fridge. I watch him in my peripheral as the news station drowns out his words.

He doesn't notice.

I finish chopping the vegetables and slide them into the waiting pot on the stove.

My eyes flick to the corner again, meeting that blinking red light like an old friend.

Devon leans against the counter, beer in hand, watching me stir. "You seem different."

"Different how?" I sweeten my tone, praying he backs the fuck up.

He takes a slow sip of his beer. "I don't know. Fitter. Have you been working out more?"

Every day. Six hours minimum. Combat training in the morning. Weights in the afternoon. Cardio at night until my lungs burn and my legs give out and I'm too exhausted to dream about pale blue eyes and scarred throats.

I shrug, playing nonchalant. "A little."

Devon's mouth curves, his bottle clicking once against the granite. "It suits you."

I don't answer. The fuck does he mean it suits me? I know it suits me.

Movement catches the corner of my eye as Daniel's silhouette passes. He lifts a hand in a subtle signal that only I know means *we got a problem*.

I turn the elements off. "Be right back."

Devon barely glances up from his phone. "Where are you going?"

"Just need to chat with my assistant." Daniel is the most unserious assistant ever. I can't believe I didn't dignify him with a more accurate job description. He also doesn't find it funny.

I wipe my hands on the dish towel, toss it over the chair, and slip through the glass doors, pulling my cardigan tight against the cold. Winter is a cruel bitch this year.

Daniel waits by the railing near the pool, posture loose but his eyes cutting right through me.

I stop in front of him. "What is it?"

Clearing his throat, he runs a hand through his beard. "The house."

Of course it's about the house. "What about it?"

"The buyer who fell through?" He watches me for a second. "It was Asher."

My mouth snaps shut, fingers biting into my arms. "What?"

"The anonymous buyer. It was Asher. He purchased the house through a shell company, but Punk traced it back to him finally, or someone *let* her finally trace it back..."

He bought my house.

"There's more." Daniel's voice drops. "He's here. Arrived in Veilarath this morning."

I blink. "On what side?"

If I didn't know this man, I'd say he looks pressed. "Ah, this side. And he's not alone."

The world goes quiet as I say her name, needing to hear it even though I already know. "Camille?"

Daniel nods, lips pulled tight.

My eyes close as I breathe in the setting sun, hoping it'll distract me from feeling that familiar pulse of *rage* returning. *Hello, old friend.*

Of course they jumped all the way into whatever they had. *Everything was fake with you.*

I grit my teeth. “But it’s my birthday weekend.”

“I know.” Daniel winces, the wrinkles on his face deepening. “Pretty sure he knows too...”

“Oh,” I laugh, but I kill it before it gives me away. “He does.”

My fingers find the choker, grazing fresh scars from where I tried everything Google and TikTok recommended I do to remove it. Be great if this fucking thing was fake too.

I open my eyes and stare out at the snow cloaked yard. At Mount Crow that has always felt like mine despite how hard I pretend I don’t want it.

Let him come. Let him see Devon in my kitchen and a version of me he doesn’t recognize anymore. He doesn’t know Devon is a job. He could be my forever home, that’s why he’s in Veilarath and we’re not in the US. I want him to see that the girl he broke doesn’t exist anymore.

I killed her myself.

Daniel interrupts my thoughts. “You want me to see what I can do?”

“No.” I turn back toward the house. “It’s fine. I’m sure we can figure out the house issue while he’s here.”

Through the glass, Devon is still at the counter, head bent over his phone, blind to everything unraveling around him, but especially to the red light flashing in the corner.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I open the group chat.

Punk: Oh no, homie...

Shut up and fix this.

Punk: I can fix what I can... but that...

Punk...

Leon: You good? We’ll be there soon.

I’m fine.

And that may just be the biggest lie I’ve ever said, because I’m pretty sure the word I’m looking for right now is homicidal.

Swinging the door open, I shoulder my way inside, a loose strand of hair catching on my lip. I blow it aside, temper burning hot under my skin.

He bought my house. *My* fucking house.

I’m halfway across the kitchen when voices drift in from the foyer. Devon’s easy laugh reaches me first, followed by a deeper voice I already

hate.

Him.

I stop in the doorway.

Devon has his back to me, one hand held out in greeting as if we're hosting a goddamn dinner party. He has no idea what he's invited into our home.

My home.

His home now, apparently.

Asher stands in the entrance, snow dusting the shoulders of his black coat. Camille hovers at his elbow, her fingers curled around his bicep like she's afraid he'll float away.

One month.

Thirty-one days since he told me I was a mistake. Since I left his house and swore I'd never fucking look at him again.

He looks good. Shit. I hate that he looks good. His jaw cuts sharper now, his neck and shoulders thicker under the coat. I know every one of his tattoos, and they shift across his skin as he turns.

His eyes find me, re-igniting a flame I'm not so sure ever burned out.

Devon follows his line of sight. "Babe, you didn't tell me new friends were coming?"

"Pretty sure I did," I say through clenched teeth. "But these aren't friends."

My eyes snap to Asher. "What are you doing here? Why did you buy my fucking house?"

Asher unzips his jacket. "Missed you too, Venom, and I didn't buy it. I put a bid on it. Like I was gonna let you sell *our* fucking house."

Our fucking house.

I wince, folding my arms in front of myself. Really bad habit. I need to stop showing my insecurities so easily.

My hands drop.

"Ah..." Devon's head swings between us, confused. "What is going on here?"

Camille shrugs. "These two are... hmmm... what should I call it? Ex lovers? Ex married?"

"You'll be *ex-fucking-iled* if you don't get the fuck out of my house, Camille." I flash a smile at her, teeth bared. "I will shoot you this time."

“Aww,” Camille pats my shoulder and every tendon in my arm locks tight. “Ash is right. You are so cute when you go all—” her hands wave. “—Assassin mode.”

I still, eyes flying to Asher who’s already glaring at Camille. I didn’t even realize I’d grabbed my gun until I feel the weight in my hand.

My brows lift. “Give me two reasons why I’m not burying a bullet in her skull, Ash...”

Asher finally drags his attention off her and onto me. “You already know *one*.”

I lower the gun with a soft growl. I need to get away. It’s been less than two minutes and I’m ready to risk my entire life just see the inside of Camille’s skull.

The front door opens again. Who the fuc—“Khloe?”

A smile splits across my face when the familiar tall replica of the asshole in the living room steps through.

“Oh my God I’m so sorry I’m early, but, wait!” she points suspiciously. “That better not be Camel-toe’s car in the driveway, she’s the only bitch I know who would have a legit pink plate in—”

My lips curl to stop my laugh as Khloe pauses near the living room, obviously noticing that her assessments were right.

She turns back to me with a fake smile. “Couldn’t even give a bitch a heads up? Just let me walk right into that one, huh?”

Her focus shifts to her brother and his—whatever—widening her arms out to them. “Hello, dearly beloved. Camille, wipe the frown off your face. It’s no secret I hate you. Also, I’m so glad you found yourselves here, but I should warn you...”

“Khloe?” Asher stares at his baby sister. “Shut the fuck up.”

Khloe fixes her face, flipping him off. “Fuck you.”

Asher ignores her, side-eying my cooking as he moves through the kitchen. Bastard.

Camille slides onto the barstool beside him, her manicured nails drumming against the marble countertop. She says something under her breath that only Asher can hear, drowning my vision blood fucking red.

In the distance somewhere, Devon laughs at something Khloe says, oblivious to what just walked through the door.

My finger twitches against the trigger.

I'm not doing this again. The spiral. The games. Watching him with her while I pretend I don't internally crash out every time he touches her. Playing house in a marriage that was never real to begin with.

Our fucking house.

The words loop and loop until they turn to static.

My arm lifts as Camille turns toward me with that smug fucking smile.

I pull the trigger, popping her right in the shoulder.

Blood sprays across the backsplash I scrubbed clean last week, before she hits the ground with a howl that would make me laugh if I wasn't so fucking furious.

"Oh, please." I roll my eyes at where she's crawling into a ball in the corner. "That's barely a fucking graze."

Asher groans, massaging his temples before his chair crashes backward. He's on his feet, crossing the room in three strides.

My eyes swing to Camille as I cross the distance, ignoring Asher. "I'd suggest you leave unless Aléia is good with having your body delivered to her in tiny little pieces." I straddle her with both feet planted on either side, waving the gun in the air. "You know Jord? Yeah, Jord. He's very good at his cleaning job. Not a speck of *dirt* left behind."

"Venom," Asher growls from behind me. "You aren't following the rules."

"Oops." I shrug, turning over my shoulder. "Guess I don't fucking care."

Khloe's trying not to laugh, but when her eyes land on her brother she straightens.

"You've lost your goddamn mind," Asher's voice deepens. The fact that he seems so upset only infuriates me more.

"You want the house?" I look between him and Camille. "Take it. You want to parade your little pet around in front of me? Fine, but she can fucking *limp*."

"Ivy..." Khloe murmurs, but it's too late. Everything I've kept locked down detonates, ricocheting through my veins until I can't tell fury from heartbreak.

The door swings open again, and Atlas steps inside, whistling when he takes in the carnage. "Good to see you again, Ivy. This—" he gestures around the room. "Very on-brand."

Asher glares at his brother.

Atlas shrugs. "What? She's consistent at least."

I'm about to turn toward the door, when Devon's gaze locks on something behind me.

Camille.

Me.

A fucking gun.

His mouth opens, but no sound comes out. The color drains from his face, leaving two spots of color on his cheeks.

Oh well. What better time?

The trigger gives beneath my finger, sending a shot through the quiet. Another follows, both recoiling against my hand

Blood spreads across Devon's shirt as he staggers backward, dropping with a thud.

"Completed." Lowering my arm, I loosen my fingers around the grip. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm leaving."

"You're not fucking going anywhere," Asher snaps, stopping me.

"I'm not in the mood to argue further with you tonight, Asher." I keep my back to him.

His footsteps strike the floor behind me.

"Okay!" Khloe claps, derailing whatever Asher had planned when he reached me. Most likely murder.

Khloe's grabs me by my elbow, unhooking her jacket off the stand. "Everyone who is bleeding can sort themselves out." She looks down to Devon. "At least those who are still *alive*."

She perks up like nothing happened. "I'm taking my sister-in-law for a drink."

Right. Because legally, I'm still fucking married.

Atlas makes a noise from behind us, but we ignore him, and Khloe pulls me through the door when I don't move.

Cold air hits my face.

I inhale, letting the scent of frost-covered pine and salt water fill my lungs, and with every breath, the knots in my muscles begin to loosen.

"Good shot, by the way," Khloe says, steering us toward her car. "Both times. But you missed Camille by a long fucking shot."

We're still laughing when a black car rolls to a stop in front of us, the engine a low hum under our noise.

Sinead leans across the passenger seat, their window already down. “Let me drive you. You know he’ll have my head if I don’t.”

I pull the door open. “Fine.”

We slide into the back, and the door shuts with a solid thunk before Sinead pulls away from the curb. They don’t ask for a destination, just turn the wheel and merge into the late-night.

I appreciate that more than they will know.

“Wait!” Khloe leans forward, grabbing the backpack on the opposite chair. “Did you...”

Sinead chuckles with a sigh. “Thought I might have needed to bribe you both, so I grabbed it from your car.”

Khloe’s pulling out clothes, thanking Sinead.

Their eyes meet mine in the mirror. “If it’s not obvious, I’m not a fan of Camille.”

I let Khloe shove a dress on me as headlights cut through the dark. Khloe yaps nonstop about a man she met in Paris who cried after sex. I go through the motions. The humming, the nodding, the laughing. Khloe doesn’t care if I’m not fully paying attention, she generally just likes to talk. Period.

We finally pull up to a curb outside a building with no signs, just a blank door and an orange light that beams down onto the road.

“Tourists never find it.” Khloe shrugs, already getting out. “Which means the drinks are cheaper and nobody’s filming.”

I’m out before she finishes the sentence.

Inside, the ceiling is low and the music loud enough to swallow conversation. Someone smokes a cigarette near the back, despite it being illegal everywhere. I order two shots of something green without reading the label and slide one to Khloe, who throws it back before I’ve even lifted mine.

Three drinks in, the edges of the room begin to soften.

Four drinks in, Khloe’s head is thrown back laughing at her own story.

I find the dance floor because I need to burn this alcohol off before we have to go back. If I don’t, I’ll either shoot someone else, or end up on Asher’s dick.

The music is loud, a messy throb that eats up the space inside my head. Hands find my waist, but I already knew they were coming. I felt his eyes

on me five minutes before he finally built the courage. He's not bad looking. Dark eyes, broad through the shoulders.

My eyes close as the crowd press in around us, music filling every corner of my skull where Asher's voice lives. I move because movement stops thinking, and I *need* to stop thinking.

The man's hands tighten on my hips.

I step away, peeling his fingers off me one at a time. He does that dramatic pleading thing men do when they think it'll help them get what they want, and I roll my eyes, making my way back to the bar.

Pathetic. Truly.

Khloe slides a fresh drink toward me.

"You okay?" she asks, yelling over 50 Cent.

I glare at her like *hell no*, and we both burst out laughing because why the fuck did I let a stranger dance with me?

Her laughter dies as she pulls me in close, wrapping her long arms around my neck. "He's an idiot, you know."

I take a long sip.

She leans back in. "For what it's worth, he's always been very good at what he does."

My grip tightens around the glass.

Is that so? Well same.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IVY

“HAD FUN?”

I pause in the entrance, door hanging open and keys in hand, then kick it shut behind me.

“Mhmm.” I drag my gaze across every plane of his chest without an ounce of shame. “Loads.”

Why does he have to look fuck-able? All the time.

Also, why did I come home this drunk.

Khloe hiccups, swaying sideways. “Ivy danced with a guy...”

“Bed.” Asher cuts her off without looking away from me. “Now.”

“But...”

“Khloe.”

I swallow a laugh, because when did he get so serious about everything.

Khloe snorts, catching the railing as she stumbles up the stairs. “Fine.”

And then it’s just us, the way it always ends up.

I shrug my coat off one shoulder, lamplight catching the dark silk of the dress Khloe forced me into when all I wanted was to drink in my sweatpants and cardigan.

“Why are you still up?” My eyes grow heavy.

“Somebody had to make sure you didn’t do something stupid.” He leans back against the counter as I kick off my heels. “Again.”

“Maybe I like stupid.” It drops lower than I mean it to, but the green fairy dissolved whatever filter I had left.

I move closer. I need more of him, simple as that.

He searches my face, mouth twitching. "You're drunk."

My finger almost finds his chest. "And you're shirtless."

Another step. "You know, you're making this rather hard to..."

His palm slams over my mouth, his nose dragging along the curve of my jaw. "If you don't keep this mouth shut, pretty soon I'm gonna throw out all the fucking rules."

He leans back enough to give me room, and I'm too drunk to want it.

"Maybe it's time we throw them out anyway?" Lifting my brows, I keep my voice low.

He catches my wrist before I can touch him, locking it above my head. The seconds stretch, and I'm fucking tired. Tired of the games, the back and forth, all of it.

I flatten my free palm over his chest. "Oh well. Guess we keep playing, and maybe tomorrow I'll bring one home to fuck..."

His hand closes around my throat and he shoves me into the wall, his mouth crashing down on mine and swallowing my laugh.

Shit.

Reality splits into some manic nightmare where I'd live and die for him.

Because I would.

Oh God...

He's kissing me and I should pull away, I know I should, but he groans and my mouth opens on a broken sound, and I lose whatever shred of self-respect I had left as I fall straight into him.

His thigh drives between mine, forcing me open, his tongue exploring my mouth.

Forcing himself to stop, he rests his forehead on mine.

"Asher..." I warn, ignoring my heart thudding like it's trying to crack my ribs.

"Fuck." He bites on a groan. "I know."

I search his eyes. *Mine*. Every single part of him is mine.

"Couldn't help it," he whispers over my lips. "I'm fucking done, Venom."

He kisses me again, slower this time, and every lick of his tongue drops me deeper. With a smirk against my mouth, he flips his middle finger toward the corner of the room.

That familiar heat comes roaring back, burning me from the inside, and suddenly this isn't enough, I need his hands, his weight, him.

His palm slides down the wall and lands on my ass.

“Is this what you wanted?” The words are hot against my pulse before his mouth softens into a feather-light kiss. “To push me until I snapped? Until I threw everything out for you?”

My nails dig into his shoulders. “Maybe I just wanted to see if you’d throw me out too.”

He laughs, the sound rattling through his chest. “I think we established that answer already.” His fingers trail down my back until they find the zipper. “Now let me fucking ruin you.”

Silk whispers over my skin before the dress pools at my feet.

Asher has never once made me feel undesirable. Which, historically, hasn’t done him any favors, since any time I want to piss him off, win an argument, or make a point, I just get naked or stare into his eyes until one of us breaks. But right now, this feels different.

You wanted this. You wanted him feral.

With every deep inhale, he drinks me, and I feel every heavy second of it.

“You wore no fucking underwear.” His lip curls, eyes going dark. “To a club,” he finishes, closing the gap.

My back hits the wall when I try to step away.

“Where you let another man touch you?” The muscles along both sides of his jaw flex.

“I...”

He cups the back of my neck and forces me onto my toes, dragging his lips over my collarbone. His teeth snap at my skin and I whimper before I can catch it.

Asher’s hand slides between my thighs and burns every other thought to nothing.

“Tell me about those guys you danced with.” His grip tightens. “Did they touch you like this?”

Knuckles skim my ribs, tracing every bone on purpose.

I arch into him. “N-no.”

Asher goes still. I swear to God, if he’s done all this just to pull away, this is the last time I embarrass myself.

A patient smirk presses to my skin. He’s enjoying this. Dragging it out, savoring how easy I come apart under him.

“No?” he murmurs, voice rough. “Then show me how they touched you, Venom.”

I guide his hand to my waist, copying the hold the stranger had on me.

“That all?” His smirk practically splits his face in half. “So fucking innocent.”

I glare at him. “Like they’d be able to touch me any other way.”

He pins my wrists to the wall above my head and slowly rolls his hips into me. His length drags against my clit through too much fabric and I bite the inside of my cheek, killing the sound before it escapes.

“Careful, Venom.” Asher presses into me again, slower. “Don’t wanna wake Atlas and be the reason I kill him when he sees you naked.”

Defeated, I drop my forehead against his chest. “Fuck you.”

It’s the alcohol. It has to be the alcohol.

Asher drags his teeth along my jaw. “Did it feel like this?”

I shake my head, my thoughts coming loose. “Didn’t... didn’t feel like this.”

“Like what?” He pauses, and the absence of his touch is its own torture.

I grab his wrist and press his hand over my pussy.

Asher stills, swallowing before dragging that cocky smirk back into place.

Fuck my pride at this point.

I thrust my hips into his palm, demanding the friction, forcing him to sink those heavy fucking fingers inside me.

He lets out a rough sound, catching my clit with his thumb and pressing hard enough to literally buckle my knees.

His lips brush my ear. “Tell me.”

“Like I’m on fire,” I admit, the confession purring out of me. “Like I might die if you stop.”

The color vanishes from Asher’s eyes before he kisses me. “Good,” he growls against my lips. “Saves me wasting a bullet.”

This is fucking dangerous. So bad.

He steps back, looking me over with deliberate slowness.

“Turn around,” he says, barely holding on. “Hands on the wall.”

My palms land where he told them to. Every nerve in my body runs hot, feeding the one thing it has always needed. *Him.*

But Asher takes his sweet fucking time, winding me up like a toy. Warmth gathers at my back while he stays close enough for me to feel each

breath, his skin never quite meeting mine.

“You know,” he drawls, every syllable grazing the nape of my neck. “I should make you wait. Teach you a lesson about running off and letting other men put their hands on you.”

His finger follows a lazy path down my back, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning. “But I’m not feeling particularly patient tonight, and since you’ve seen me with Camille, I’d say we’re even...”

“Not even fucking close,” I snarl, but the words cut off as Asher slams his large hand over my mouth, his body crushing me harder into the wall.

“If you were smart,” his mouth at my ear, and I curl my fingers, “you wouldn’t fucking push me right now.”

He slides his hand to my breast, finger and thumb rolling my nipple until I arch.

Keeping his other hand over my mouth, he holds me there. “Now I’m going to ask you some questions, and you’re going to answer them. Understood?”

I nod against his calloused palm.

He trails his fingers over my stomach, dipping lower. “How many men have you killed, Venom?”

The question catches me off guard, but not enough to pull me out of the torment of his touch.

“Too many...” I mumble into his palm as his hand slides between my thighs and finds my clit.

“Good girl.”

I gasp when the heel of his thumb grinds down, pressure driving my hips forward to meet him.

“And how many have you fucked?”

Why the fuck is he asking me this.

“Nine.”

Asher laughs under his breath, sliding his slick finger through me, and I grind against him like anything less than his cock filling me will never be enough.

“Interesting ratio,” he teases. *I’m going to die.* “Tell me, which do you enjoy more?”

His palm lifts off my mouth, letting fresh air into my lungs. “K-killing.”

“Liar,” Asher growls, and his finger curls on the next stroke almost bringing me to my knees. His thumb finds my clit with a pressure so

merciless I grab his arm just to stay upright.

“Your body gives you away.” His mouth drops to my ear. “It’s fucking built for this. For me.”

I’m close, so fucking close, every drag of his hand driving me toward the edge. And he stops.

A broken whimper slips out. “Asher!” I gasp, my hips jerking after the touch.

His hand slides up to my throat, settling there with enough pressure to speed my pulse. “How old were you,” he asks, “the first time you took a life?”

“S-sixteen,” I stammer, and the answer pulls me straight back into that girl’s skin.

His fingers tighten by a fraction. “And the first time you got fucked?”

I swallow against his palm. “I don’t want...” My breath catches, warmth rushing into my cheeks as the words die there. I don’t care. I need this infuriating man with the same desperate certainty I need fucking therapy.

Which is a lot.

He hoists me higher, and I hook my legs around his waist until his hard cock grinds against my clit.

“Last question,” Asher says, his breath dragging over my throat. “How long have you wanted me? For real wanted me?”

I open my mouth, and nothing comes out. How do I tell him it’s been there since the first second I met him? Every touch, every loaded glance, every minute beside him cut deeper than the wounds on my back. *I should’ve said it sooner. I should’ve—*

His fingers slide between us, his circles firmer. My hips chase the pressure before I can stop them.

“Tell me, Venom,” he says, teasing. “Or I swear to God, I’ll leave you like this the same way you left me to bleed out on your floor.”

“Since the beginning,” I finally choke out, my throat burning. I clutch at his shoulders. “Fuck, Asher, since I first saw you.”

A triumphant smirk curves his lips. “That’s what I thought.”

His fingers pick up their pace, dragging me right back to the edge. Pleasure builds, higher and higher, my nails digging into his shoulders.

He stops.

I let out a frustrated growl. "Please!" Not even caring how pathetic I sound. "Please, Asher, I need..."

"What do you need?" he asks, voice deceptively soft.

I meet his gaze and let him see exactly how desperate I am. "You. I need you to fuck me. To ruin me."

There's an animal living inside every man, and Asher's just bared its teeth. "Relax, Venom. You don't need to be so thirsty."

He grins, shoving his sweats down just enough to free his cock. Before I can threaten his life, he buries himself in one savage thrust.

I cry out, my head falling back as his girth stretches me to the edge of pain. He doesn't give me a second to adjust, setting a punishing rhythm that has me clawing at his back.

"Fuck," he growls, his teeth grazing my neck. "So fucking tight."

His fingers press into my throat until dark spots dance at the corners of my eyes. Blood pounds in my ears, every slam of his hips sending shocks through me until my nerves sing, every inch of skin hypersensitive where he touches.

He kicks my legs wider, driving back into me hard enough to rattle the whole house.

"This what you want?" he snarls, fisting my hair and yanking my head back. "To be fucked like a slut instead of worshiped like a God?"

I moan, the sound caught somewhere between pleasure and pain.

"Answer me." He punctuates each word with a brutal thrust.

"Yes!" The word tears out of me. "Fuck, yes, it's what I wanted."

His rhythm breaks, every stroke harder than the last, his fingers biting into my flesh.

A heavy thrum starts low in my gut, tightening with every drag of his cock. My nails rake his spine as the pressure climbs past anything I can fight, and something inside me snaps, wanting nothing but the fall.

"Asher," I whimper. "I'm close, I'm gonna..."

My whole body's already shaking, already gone, already his.

His hand clamps over my mouth again, muffling my cries as I shatter around him. Wave after wave rolls through me until my legs give out, every muscle useless.

He doesn't stop, his pace never faltering even as my body quivers in the aftershocks. His hand drops from my mouth and I drag in a ragged breath as oversensitivity turns every thrust into exquisite torture.

“Did I say you could come?” he growls, his fingers squeezing my chin to hold me in place.

Words tangle on my tongue, everything half-gone. “N-no, but I...”

He flips me onto my back, the stairs biting into my spine as he lays his body over mine. His weight crushes me into the steps, my legs parting on instinct as he drives back in, deeper than before, the grind of his hip at that ruthless angle tearing a cry straight from my throat.

My fingers twist in his hair, pulling him closer even as every part of me screams to push him off. “Asher, it’s too fucking much. I can’t...”

He licks a path to my breast, sucking my nipple into his mouth. “You can. And you fucking will.”

His knuckles glide over the leather sheath at my thigh. “Still wanna love me?”

Another thrust punches the breath out of my lungs, a strangled sound snagging in my throat as the gun’s edge drags slow across my skin.

“Answer me.” He flashes his teeth. “This is mine,” Asher hisses, driving deeper. “Just mine.”

“Yours.” *You fucking idiot.* “It’s always been yours.”

“So glad you said that.” His lips brush mine, his sweat dripping onto my face. The cold barrel traces down my ribs like he’s carving snow, and my heart slows.

He circles his hips, grinding right where I need him, and every nerve there fires at once. “Do you trust me?” he rasps, voice thick.

Higher... almost there...

The wave hits without warning, my whole body arching off the stairs as every muscle locks and pulls him deeper, clenching so tight I can feel each ridge of him, each pulse. The scream that leaves me would wake the whole house if his mouth wasn’t there to swallow it.

He groans, grinding through every convulsion, each slow stroke of his cock dragging my soul out with it.

My thighs shake against his hips, my heels slipping on the edge of the stair.

“That’s it,” he murmurs into my jaw, working me through the aftershocks until I’m whimpering at every shift. “Give me all of it.”

He doesn’t give me time to breathe. My senses are still swimming, my skin slick and raw, when his smirk presses warm against my temple.

A few seconds pass before he leans back, his thumb sweeping along my jaw to tip my face up.

“Nod,” he says, still buried inside me. “Do you trust me?”

The stars barely die behind my eyes, but I manage to nod. *I love you.*

Something in him snaps.

He pumps into me with a hard, brutal rhythm until the stairs groan beneath us. Each thrust hits that deep place that blurs my vision, his cock splitting me open while his hand braces beside my head.

“Fuck,” he grits out, jaw clenched, eyes locked on mine. “Fuck, Venom.”

I can’t think. Can’t fucking speak. Soaked and swollen, my body just takes him, nothing but the wet slap of skin filling the quiet.

My eyes stay fixed on him. Because Asher coming apart is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

His control slips one piece at a time, the smirk gone, the teasing gone, leaving raw need carved into his face. Sweat slides down his throat, his breath ragged against my mouth.

This is the version of him no one else gets. The one I’d kill for. *The one I’d die for.*

“Gonna fill you up,” he rasps, his thrusts turning sloppy. “Gonna make sure you fucking feel me tomorrow.”

“Do it.” I drag my nails down his arms.

He buries himself to the hilt with a sound that’s half growl, half my name. He works his cum into me, the hot pulse of him spilling deep. I’m so lost in him, in us, that I barely feel the cool glide of the gun over my ribs.

Until the loud crack of a bullet splits through the house and burning hot pain erupts at my side.

Asher drops his weight onto me, his lips grazing my ear. “Now we’re even.”

Tears run down the side of my face because the motherfucker just shot me.

“Asher!”

He rolls his eyes, yanking his pants up with one hand and tucking the gun into his waistband. “This was your idea.”

He scoops me into his arms before I can protest, carrying me up the rest of the steps.

“Put me the fuck down!” I smack at his chest. “I can walk.”

His arms lock tighter, one hand splaying flat against my spine. “Shut up.”

Even though he’s moving way too slow, I manage to peek over his shoulder. “I just got this carpet.”

“I know,” he mutters, kicking the door shut behind us.

He sets me down against the bathroom mirror, my back smearing a wet streak of red across the glass.

“Sit fucking still,” Asher growls, and when I don’t, he grabs me by the throat and holds me there with a glare. “Gonna need you to calm your ass down.”

“You.” I pull in a hissing breath. “Shot me while you came!” The pain climbs hotter with every second. “Masochist!”

“Clearly!” His eyes go wide. “I’m in love with you.”

My mouth falls open. *Did he just say that out loud, or am I starting to lose consciousness.*

I hold my hand up in front of my face and squint. “One, two...” Cupboards open and slam, and I shift out of his way, giving up on the test to hold the wound at my side. Seems more important anyway.

I lower onto the edge of the bath, watching him flip open first aid kits.

“How’d you get the exact same spot?”

He doesn’t lose focus on what he’s doing. “What do you mean?”

He finds the right kit, muscles rippling as he tears it open.

Stay focused.

“You shot me.” Shit flies everywhere and we both ignore it. “In the same fucking spot, Asher!”

He digs the gauze and antiseptic off the floor, a pair of tweezers out of the tub.

“Here,” he mutters, kneeling in front of me, peeling my fingers off the wound, gentle even though I’m still pissed.

Air hits it and I hiss, wincing.

He ignores my pain, dabbing antiseptic onto a cotton pad and cleaning the entry point. I let him move me however he needs while he inspects every part.

“You’re good at this,” I say, voice flat. “Almost like you’ve done it before.”

He catches the sarcasm, his mouth twitching. “Snowboarding’s a brutal sport. Fractures, gashes, concussions, you know.”

His hand closes around the tweezers, and I'm about to ask what the exact fucking plan is when the needle pinches my wound.

"Ash," I heave, sweat dripping into my eyes, everything going dark at the edges. "Stop fucking around. There's no gentle way to dig a bullet out." Seconds that feel like minutes later, pressure pulls like a band around my belly, then he flashes the small metal nub with a smirk.

I glare at him.

He drops the bullet into the sink, finds a needle, and leans back in close.

I pull away. "Is this your first time on a girl?"

He threads the suture with one hand, the other steadying my skin. "If I said no, you gonna shoot her too?"

My eyes narrow, and he smirks up at me from below. "I'm playing, Venom." When I won't give him the satisfaction of letting it go, he grips my chin with his bloody hand and forces me into a kiss.

I melt, because I'm fucked. And weak.

Before I can recover, he pierces the skin with the sharp point of the needle. One stitch. Two. The thread pulls taut, sealing me shut.

"You wanna ask me something, just do it." He doesn't stop, his fingers working like it's his job. "Don't dance your sexy ass around the question."

I reach out before he can finish, my fingers brushing the thin white line across his throat. It's barely there, a shallow crescent from ear to ear.

He freezes, hands going still. "Ivy..."

"Nah uh..." I shake my head. "I'm done."

His eyes fly to mine. "You don't know what you're doing..."

"I don't?" I tilt my head. "Pretty sure you're the one who just signed our death warrants..."

I drop my hand, but the contact lingers, electric on my skin.

"The bathroom's safe. Punk left it out on purpose, but the rest of the house..." His pupils dilate. "She cracked the servers wide fucking open for him."

"So they also witnessed what happened before," I wave a hand around the room, "all of what just happened?"

Asher nods. "Yeah, and clearly our little plan wasn't fucking working because we happened, so..."

His argument is valid. It took us less than ten minutes around each other for bullets to fly and bodies to drop. And that's leaving out the sex.

"...so..." I whisper, gulping. "So now we're fucked."

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

IVY

PAST

“I KNOW who Le Boucher Sans Loi is,” I say, my throat squeezing the words thin.

His whole body locks beneath my hands.

I keep my eyes on him. “I know who’s been hunting La Maison Du Mal for eleven years.”

Silence drags for several seconds before his mouth finally moves. “Who.”

Not so much a question more than it is a demand. I hold his stare anyway because I know. I know right now that it doesn’t matter what I was trained to do. I’d drop it all for him in a heartbeat. I’ve never been one to make the same mistake twice.

I clear my throat. “It’s Emeric, Asher, my boss.”

He stays fixed on me without a single flinch.

His head slowly shakes, whatever fight he’s having with himself slipping away as he lets out a lazy breath. “Emeric is one of the founding families of La Maison Du Mal, Ivy.”

What? I almost ask him to repeat himself, because...what.

I keep my mouth shut. Frozen where I stand, I let his sentence hang there between us. I need to absorb the words before I react.

He continues. “Everything you’ve done, every job, every kill, every piece of intelligence you handed him. You were housekeeping. You were

part of a very long vendetta that Emeric has held over La Maison Du Mal for—"he pauses, before rolling his eyes. "I mean shit, for as long as time."

The carving of the loyalty wings, how much he loved Nonna, how he saved me when I was thirteen years old and trapped in a pedophile ring that was run by fucking Parker.

I shake my head. "No, why?" But the answer crawls up through my chest before I even finish asking.

Seventeen missed calls.

His eyes shift to the side, muscles in his face hardening.

I swallow against the ache. "Why the hell didn't you tell me any of this?"

"I was going to." He steps forward, his features tightening. "But you put a fucking bullet in me before I got the chance, Ivy."

I open my mouth. Close it.

"And after that?" He rolls his tongue against his teeth, shaking his head. "I couldn't trust you. Not until I knew you weren't still under all the mind fuck of the Codex. Not until I knew Emeric hadn't already hollowed you out and filled you back up with whatever the fuck he needed you to be."

Silence.

Eleven years realigns through every memory. Every mission, every message, every time Emeric told me to trust the process with that calm tone. It made me feel handpicked for his design. It was all a fucking lie.

I curl my fingers into fists at my sides, biting crescents into my palms with my nails.

Asher scans my face, searching for the crack, the warning sign that I'm about to shatter into thousands of pieces that he can't put back together. I don't give him one.

"How are you talking right now?" I say, careful with my words. "If what you're saying is true, then you know Emeric's reach. You *know* he has eyes and ears over every fucking speck of this world."

"You're right, he does." His eyes narrow, as he lowers onto the single sofa. "Everywhere but here. Veilarath Lane."

My stomach dips. "What?"

Surely I misheard him.

Every second of this conversation is getting under his skin.

"He doesn't have access to this island. Period. But we've let him in everywhere else."

Everything he's just dropped on me turns over in my head before I land on the one thing I need to address. "I know Parker is your father."

He doesn't even flinch, kicking his leg out with a low chuckle. "Who snitched?"

I search his face for the tell, the flicker of deceit. His eyes hold steady, borderline vulnerable.

"That doesn't matter." I shake my head. There's no way I'm telling him it was his mom. "You're... part of him."

Leaning forward, he drags me closer by the backs of my thighs, and I drop to my knees in front of him.

With a finger pressed below my chin, he directs my face up to his. "Fuck that. Just because DNA ties me to him. Doesn't mean shit. Hasn't for a while."

He starts to pull back but my hand flies out, catching his jaw to hold him in place.

"Stop," I whisper, the walls inside my head trembling. "Tell me."

Whether he tries to hide it or not, I see it. Right there in the split second before he answers. The hard set of his mouth. His eyes raking over my face for the hundredth time, and I know exactly what he's doing. He's searching for the crack, the tell, the part where I feed him a pretty lie and expect him to swallow it like everyone else has.

He doesn't trust me. I'll be earning that back for the rest of my life.

"I love you," I say, not only because it's the most truthful thing I've ever said, but because it's all I'll ever be able to give him.

I lock my other hand around his neck, forcing his forehead down to mine. "You hear me? I don't care what you've done. I just. I need to know if the son is—" "The words stick to my throat, refusing to leave.

"Mmm," Sarcasm drips from his chuckle. "Not so easy is it?"

I kiss him, so soft his lips barely feather mine.

"Well are you?" I try to keep the desperation out of my tone but I'm fucking dying here.

His jaw locks. "You shouldn't even need to ask me that shit."

He pulls back, ripping the air from my lungs.

I've seen every face he owns. Rage, laughter, the soft one he watches me with when he thinks I'm asleep. But he's never pulled away physically.

Shit. I'm so far gone I'm going to check myself into rehab at this point.

I rest back on my heels, swallowing past the throbbing in my throat.

The sun starts to set in a hue of sorbet, deepening his tanned skin as shadows darken along his cheekbones.

“What is it you think I was doing with Parker?” He asks, shocking me. “And don’t fucking bullshit.”

I shrug, because I truly don’t know. “Being a son who wanted to know his father?”

He holds me in place. “And how long do you think I’d been his son for?”

I tilt my head. “I’m going to go with all your life because well, that’s how—“

“—Venom,” he snaps but it’s gentle. “Now isn’t the time.”

I breathe out a sigh. He’s right.

“I don’t know. I guess I don’t know why you both lied and didn’t just say you were his son. Unless,” I lift a single finger. “Parker didn’t know you were his?”

“—You can do better than that,” he answers dryly.

Asshole.

This is going to be a long day. “I don’t know. Fill me in.”

He drags a hand down his face. “You’ll figure it out, Ivy.”

“It’s okay,” I whisper, but he tries to move out of my grip.

I force him back down to me. “I don’t need to know.”

His eyes widen. “You do, but it just can’t be me to tell you.”

“I know you’re not like him, Asher.” Guilt weighs down my words for even asking him that in the first place. “I saw it every single day how much you didn’t engage with him, I just want to know why. Why you put yourself there if you despised him so much?”

His hand slips behind my head, as if he’s afraid I’ll run. “I was there for *you*, Ivy. Not him. Not Camille. Not anyone else but fucking you.”

My brows cross. “What?”

He traces the choker over my neck, and my eyes fall to the faint scar on his.

“Mine. You’re never leaving me.” The words rip out of him and the muscles in his neck tense when he swallows.

I place my hand over his as my answer.

His grip on the chain tightens. “That’s an order, Ivy, not a declaration.”

“Okay!” I answer quickly, because I know. I know I can’t leave him even if I wanted to. And I have wanted to. Many times. “So, La Maison Du

Mal, is this another family?"

He pushes up to his full height with a dry laugh, like the idea is so fucked it's almost funny. "I wish."

"Why would you wish? Playhouse isn't something I'd wish on anyone."

Which means he's either more fucked up than I thought, or he doesn't know enough about what I do.

Time slows as he turns over his shoulder. "Because killing one-thousand trained assassins would be much easier than going up against even just *one* member of La Maison Du Mal."

Nothing. I have nothing to answer back to that, so I stand in place, mouth open.

I force myself to move forward. "Okay, so what do we do?"

"You believe me?" he asks, his eyes softening, as if I've given him something he's wanted all along.

I dampen my bottom lip. It's not like I have a choice, since my soul decided to trust him long before my heart did. "I believe you."

Threading our fingers together, he tugs me onto his lap.

I swing my legs over to either side so I'm straddling him and bury my hand in his hair.

"Mmmm, fuck you feel good." his eyes roll back, tension rolling off him with every twitch of his muscles. "We have to break up."

I pull back. "What?"

"I was on the phone with him today. That's who you saw me talking with. Emeric has been in hiding since the beginning. No one has seen him. Except you, of course."

"So what did he want?" It makes sense more than him not replying to my texts. I would have sat with that for weeks, months, if Asher didn't just tell me this.

"He wanted me to kill you."

His mouth snaps shut, and the next words push through gritted teeth. "The Houses see you all as a problem. One they have no interest in fixing, so he wants you all dead. Obviously this appeases Aléia since she wants me with Camille."

My vision blurs. I trusted Emeric. No, more than that—I was damn loyal to him.

"We have to bait him out of hiding," Asher continues, his hands landing on my thighs. "Public fucking breakup. Leave you out in the open for him,

in his mind, unprotected, since I buttered them up enough to think the only reason you were married to me was so I could kill you myself.”

I try to put even more distance between us, but he catches my face, forcing me still. “Which if you haven’t figured out already, is bullshit.”

I wish his words washed away the ache in my chest, but they don’t. Too much has happened.

He searches my eyes. “I fucking love you, Venom. Now, are you gonna play?”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ASHER

I'm out of fucking ideas and our girl is way too fucking smart. She's about to figure my shit out, then what? We didn't prepare for this. I tried every play in the book but none work. If she figures this shit out before I find him, then we're all fucked.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

IVY

PRESENT

I GLARE at him as if he grew sixteen heads and a new personality. Because he basically did. Okay, wait, that's not fair, he didn't but still... I prefer the sound of it.

"You've got that look again..." he teases, head tilting to the side.

He's tripping if he thinks stating the obvious will change it. Instead, I stare back at him as if he said nothing at all.

"What look?" I ask, my tone a little too sweet for the pain burning at my side.

His eyes narrow. "The look where you wanna kill me or fuck me."

Accurate.

I push from the edge of the bath, slowly making my way into the bedroom. He wrapped me up too tight to be able to move at any angle, much less ones that are going to make me sleep well tonight, but I shove the sheets back anyway, ignoring him.

"I don't know what it is you're talking about."

Slipping into the cold sheets, I shuffle further under as the lights flick off and his footsteps pad over the carpet. A light breeze puffs beneath the sheet as he slips in, and not a second later, his arm is over me, pulling me deep.

He kisses the back of my head. "I'm sorry." It's a whisper, so low that even if Emeric was checked into this house right now, he'd miss it.

Asher's arms squeeze around me.

"Fuck," he growls, dragging his lips over my shoulder. "I'm fucking sorry, baby."

My throat swells around words I want to say but can't, so I slide further beneath his arm, feeling my heart level out the longer I'm with him.

"I didn't—"

I shake my head, stopping his words, because no. Because what he wants to say right now won't change the situation we're in.

Because we're still playing fucking house.

With his heart beating against my back, I feel myself slowly relax, tracing circles on his forearm and finding ridges of old scars I've never asked about. There's too many. Too many stories written into his skin that I'll never know.

"I can hear you thinking," he murmurs against my hair.

"I'm not," I lie, because the small ones don't count.

"You are." His hand flattens against my belly, pulling me closer. "It's loud."

I don't answer, just listen to the clock on the wall tick forward.

His thumb moves against my ribs in a slow stroke.

"Stop," I sob with a hiccup.

"Stop what?" he asks roughly.

"Being gentle," I tell him, the words scraping out.

His hand stills. The silence stretches until I can't stand it, and I turn in his arms to face him. Wish I hadn't. Moonlight from the back window catches his eyes, making them brighter than they have any right to be.

"I don't know what you want from me," I breathe, my chest tightening.

His lip twitches. "Everything."

"That's not an answer." My fingers dig into his chest.

He shifts a little. "It's the only one I have."

I study his face, the defined curve of his jaw, the effortless way his hair is always styled. Beautiful yet brutal. Mine and not mine.

"Ask me again," he says quietly.

"Ask you what?" Every second it gets harder to breathe.

Silence.

"Anything," he answers, mouth moving over my lips. "*Anything.*"

I hesitate. It's a question I want to ask, but at the same time terrified to ask it.

“Are you hiding anything else from me?”

It’s the only way I’d know if I can move forward with him.

“Because Emeric is going to know now. He’s going to see us right now, in this bed, stuck together. Do you have a plan?”

He holds my eyes for a moment, then leans forward and catches my bottom lip with his teeth. “The plan right now is sleep.”

His mouth brushes my forehead, and nineteen years of weight finally shifts off my shoulders. I want to say something, want to hold onto this moment a little longer, but my body has already decided for me.

I LOVED Désamour at this hour. It’s all empty streets and silence, with the exception of fruit workers who were just starting their day. Our final weekend was here, come Monday, and we’d be back in the States starting new lives. Or one thousand of the same... hard to tell which anymore.

Shuttered storefronts stay closed as I walk through the township, and for the first time ever, it feels like home. Cobblestone pathways, buildings that have weathered decades through time. I didn’t know anything about Désamour, yet it kept me safe for years.

My feet stop when I see the old chapel that sits on the corner of the main street. Spires jut skyward, and a cross hangs from the front. The structure is so old it might’ve stood here when Christ himself walked.

Should I...

I glance over my shoulder to see how far Jord is. He could take minutes, or hours. Before I can second-guess myself, I jog across the road and climb the steps.

The heavy doors groan open, and a cold breeze whisks through my body. Let me guess... even God himself doesn’t want me in his home.

Can’t say I blame him.

The doors click shut behind me, and I wince, hoping I didn’t disturb anyone... or anything.

Voices sound through the chapel from somewhere past the first row of pews.

I freeze. I don’t know if I should stay here like a child being caught doing something they shouldn’t or leave and pretend I was never here.

Someone clears their throat, and I slowly make my way to a spot that’s hidden enough to not make me look like I’m lurking.

“There’s been talk that he has begun moving through The Houses. No one knows who he is, so they don’t know who to look out for.”

A chair leg scrapes, then paper rustles.

The old priest answers, his voice softer than the other. “Well, if that is true, many should be very afraid. He is no threat to us. He’s hunting leaders. Powerful ones. Organizations that thought themselves untouchable.”

“It’s only a matter of time before he comes to Désamour,” the other man interrupts. “They say he has eyes that would chill the Devil.”

I’m starting to feel a little shady sitting here like this.

The priest lets out a breath through his nose. “I’m sure he would love that.”

Silence.

“What I mean is that we should start warning people.”

Maybe I should pray. That’s one thing I’ve never tried, along with anything from Karma Sutra, though I’m not sure Leon would be up for it.

Footsteps scrape closer, and by the time I look up, it’s too late. The priest is already moving down the aisle in a flow of his black robe.

He stops at my pew as if he’d expected me all along, and for one second, I think he might know me, really know me.

Instead, he offers me a folded sheet of paper. “For your safety.”

I take it with a gentle smile, flipping it open to see the faceless outline of a shadow and the words

LE BOUCHER SANS LOI.

Below it, a warning in blunt print.

***Report any suspicious activity and avoid leaving your
home after dark.***

I glance up at the priest.

They just said he targets people in power, the ones who hide behind their money and think they can commit crimes and get away with it.

I tuck it into my pocket.

If fear is what they’re handing out, I’m not in the mood to collect.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I'm shrugging out of my coat and digging the note from the pocket.

"Nonna," I call as I head into the dining room, unfolding the paper between my fingers.

I stop when I see she isn't alone.

Emeric sits beside her, burn scars pulling his skin tight, the flesh around one eye folded in on itself.

"Didn't realize you were coming by." I glance between him and Nonna.

His eyes drop to the paper in my hand, and he lifts a hand for it. "What's that?"

"Oh." I hand it over with a shrug and pull out a chair. "I went into the chapel and the priest gave it to me. Looks like there's a killer out there."

Nonna's eyes cut to Emeric, his slide back to her. Everyone files in behind me, and Emeric gives each of them a moment of his attention.

"I feared this was coming, which is why I hoped you'd all be gone before it did."

What? What does he mean? I go to ask him just that when Leon's hand lands on my shoulder and I relax into his touch. Our bodies know each other better than either of us would ever admit.

Leon leans in, his fingers squeezing. "What is it?"

Emeric pushes the page across the table. "This."

I look down at the outline again, as if it's going to show anything different. Kind of lazy to draw a damn outline and then tell people to fear him. We don't even know who we're looking out for.

"I am Le Boucher Sans Loi." Emeric lays his hand flat on the table. "My persona has been discovered, so I will be going under for the foreseeable future."

"You?" My shoulders go still. "But..."

He gives a small shake of his head, and Leon's grip tightens.

"No questions." Emeric's voice booms "This should come as no surprise to any of you. You know who I am, how I trained you, and what I'm capable of. You know what happens if I am exposed. Stay vigilant."

How? I mean, I know he's dangerous, but—my world drops out from beneath me because of fucking course it's him. You don't save broken kids from the dark without being brave enough to enter it. How is this any different...

My eyes snap open and for a second I'm still in the chapel, walking through the door to my home with Emeric's hand flat on the table as he gestures for the poster.

Sweat slicks my neck and chest, pooling in the dip of my collarbone.

My heart slams against my ribs, making the wound at my side scream at me to move or fight. The damp sheets tangle around my legs, trapping me in the heat of the nightmare, and suddenly I can't breathe.

In. Out.

Asher's arm lies heavy across my waist, solid and warm, his fingers curled loosely against my skin while he sleeps. I press my palm over his knuckles and hold it there, counting the seconds between each thud until the gap stretches wide enough for air.

That was the first time we all truly knew to fear Emeric, and being able to fly under the radar for so long further gained our respect.

Every time I blink, that outline sears itself into my brain all over again, fresh as the moment I saw it. The angle of his jaw looked almost exactly how I'd always pictured Emeric's before the burns.

I slip out from beneath the sheets without disturbing Asher, dragging my fingers through my hair. Le Boucher had no patience. He stayed controlled, sure, but waiting? Never. He proved that during our training when he shoved us toward our first US targets the second we arrived.

Why are you thinking of this at—

I snatch my phone off the bedside table.

Three-thirty-three a.m.

Shit.

I need air.

I tiptoe out of the room, pull on a nightgown, and knot the belt tight as that weekend plays through my head again. Why isn't he attacking? He saw us together. Saw my drunken mess and Asher's annoyingly impressive aim. Yet he's still hiding. By now, he should've come in guns blazing and taken us all out.

Slipping out the patio door, I shiver as the cold slips beneath my nightgown.

I try to force the pieces together again. The priest's story. That jaw. Emeric's face has carried burns for as long as I've known him, surely the priest would've mentioned them. Anyone would. You don't describe a man

who frightens you that badly and leave out the one detail that would make him.

Le Boucher had patience. A fucking obscene amount of it.

Emeric? I had doubts. He got pissed when we took too long to finish a task, and God forbid I couldn't recite a chapter from the Codex after reading it once.

Trust Le Boucher, Nonna had said.

Why tell me to trust the man who'd end up killing her? Nobody could fool Nonna that completely. *Nobody*. Emeric couldn't have manipulated her that badly. Impossible.

The only other explanation would be that...

"What's the matter, Venom?" Asher asks behind me, his voice brushing across my back. "Have a nightmare?"

The grass crackles beneath my feet, and I hear him stop a few yards behind me.

I turn to face him, then hesitate as the moonlight sharpens every hard edge of his face.

Thud. Thud.

My heart kicks into a gallop, each beat pounding clear to my toes.

Those eyes. Almost white in the dark. Ice stretched over a frozen ocean...

My mouth dries up. The priest's voice loops through my head. *He had eyes that would chill the Devil*. I'd convinced myself he meant empty. Soulless. A man with nothing left inside capable of thawing.

The priest wasn't talking in metaphor's. Not completely anyway. He'd been talking about the color.

I search Asher's face as the truth gathers itself. Every question he dodged. Every hushed secret between his family. The calm he wore when anyone else would've panicked. His patience with me in all the years I've known him.

And those fucking eyes.

He stays still. Even his breathing changes, his chest holding for half a second too long before it rises again. He watches the answer take shape across my face, following each tiny betrayal my body offers him—the widening of my eyes, the twitch in my jaw, my fingers curling against my palm.

Oxygen thickens until each breath is a struggle.

He's always known this was coming. Maybe every soft look, every smartass comment, every touch, it all had this ending buried underneath.

I wait for him to grin and call me paranoid. I wait for some filthy joke, some clever excuse that'll let me hate myself for doubting him.

He could remind me he'd already told me everything.

He could swear he hasn't lied to me again.

His jaw flexes once.

He says nothing.

Silence cracks around us as Nonna's face flashes behind my eyes. Then the priest's poster, then Emeric's hand flat on the table as he claimed the name.

He kills leaders. Their families. Their lovers. Anyone in his path that gets in the way.

Cold spreads under my skin. All this time, I thought we were on the same side as this evil. Turns out, we've been hunted by it all along.

My stomach twists, turning everything in it to acid.

I suck in a deep breath. "Asher."

He takes a single, slow step toward me.

I counter it, stepping back, the wound on my side screaming.

I've always said I wasn't a runner. I charge headfirst into everything that chases me, but this time—

I fucking run.

ASHER

IVY SPRINTS barefoot across the grass, disappearing through the clearing of trees.

"You gonna chase her?" Atlas asks from behind me. "Or just watch her disappear?"

I don't answer.

Out of all the things I thought she would do when she finally figured it out, running wasn't one of them. Murder? Yes. Run? No.

Dovecrest was bullshit. I knew it the second I laid eyes on her again.

Time doesn't heal all wounds, especially the ones that tell you they love you.

"She knows," I say instead. "About...me."

Atlas exhales. "Then she's running from *you*, not Emeric."

I flip him off without turning. "No shit."

He steps beside me, shoulder brushing mine. "You want me to bring her back?"

"No."

He pauses, shuffling his feet. "You want me to kill her..."

The corner of my lip twitches. "Touch her and I'll gut you."

Atlas barks out a laugh. "Just checking to make sure we actually are on the same page. Also, I ain't about to run through the forest, so if you think—"

"—shut the fuck up, Atlas." I head back inside because if I hear another fucking sound from my brother my mom's gonna be down a kid.

Atlas looks between me and the spot Ivy ran through. "Yo, you can't just leave her out there, Ash. She'll fucking die!"

I ignore him.

"Ash!" he yells again, but I slam the door closed, cutting him off. I'm not worried about her dying. If she got too cold she'd slide into the hot springs she stumbled across a while ago, or she'd just come back. Her training means she can probably handle temperatures that would kill anyone else. So as per usual, Atlas is being dramatic.

Khloe flies up from the sofa, Camille right beside her.

"Jesus. Did everyone fucking wake up?"

"What is happening?" Camille asks, eyes wide and face pale.

So this is what fear looks like. Something Ivy could never feel because I would *never* fucking kill her. She just doesn't know it yet.

Camille stumbles back, catching herself on a chair. "Asher?"

Too late.

I fist the hair at the back of her head, tearing the phone from her hand before tossing her at Khloe.

Khloe catches her without effort. "And what the hell do you think I'm gonna do with her?"

"Tie her up," I say as if talking to a toddler.

Khloe snorts. "No offense, big brother, but—"

“—oh you are so dead, Asher! You go against the fucking Conduct! You go against generations of loyalty, blood—”

Khloe’s elbow slams into her face and Camille drops to the ground with a thud.

“If I knock her out we don’t need to tie her up.” Khloe shrugs, moving for the alcohol cabinet on the floating shelf by the back wall.

“Asher!” Atlas snaps from the entrance. “She will die out there.”

“She won’t,” Khloe says. “And we all know why.”

Exactly.

Khloe shoves Camille with her toe. “So how bad of a number has Emeric done on her?”

Atlas sucks in a breath. “You did make sure before you let her run off, didn’t you? Because if you hadn’t, we’re all fucking dead.”

My eyes roll. “Well-the fuck-aware, dipshit.”

Why didn’t I just knock Ivy’s ass out and tie her up in the basement...

“Everyone cliff side.” I grab the hoodie off the sofa and shove it on. “We’ll meet you all there.”

“Boss?” Devon hollers from behind me. I glance over my shoulder at the arm in the sling. He looks fucked up, but Ivy did a good job of missing a killshot.

Again.

“What?” I snap, still wanting to kill one of my own soldiers for touching her.

He clears his throat. “It could be too late.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

IVY

I RUN.

Snow bites into my bare feet. Dead leaves whip my ankles, catching against the thin cuts already striping my skin. I shove through the trees, dragging air into my burning lungs.

Le Boucher is Asher.

“How the fuck did I miss it?” I gasp, stumbling over a buried root.

Asher watches me enter a room as if everyone around us has forfeited the right to breathe.

Pathetic, Ivy.

My foot slides on frozen mud, sending me shoulder-first into a pine. Bark tears my palm when I catch myself. I stay there, bent over, breath sawing through my chest while the woods tilt around me.

Footsteps crunch behind me, locking my knees. Fuck! No way did he catch me.

A hooded figure ducks into view, shoving the fabric back. A woman. A branch snaps to my side, and my head whips toward the sound, eyes blurred.

“Ivanya,” the woman whispers. “Let me hel—”

I shove her out of the way and keep running.

The wind slips beneath my clothes, drying the sweat along my ribs.

A hard weight cracks across the side of my head. My knees collapse before I find a weapon, a face, even a breath, and everything goes black.

Pain pulses hot and uneven as my body sways with the water. Am I in water?

The yacht. Memories.

Darkness takes me again.

I'm screaming before my eyes open. Fire sears both wrists. Metal cuts into skin and bone, the cold links pulling tight with every twitch. I'm hanging with my toes grazing concrete, shoulders wrenched beside my ears, my own weight tightening the restraints for whoever put me here.

I blink through crusted blood. The room swims. Gray walls, no windows, a single buzzing fluorescent bar overhead.

Emeric sits three feet away in a metal folding chair, one ankle crossed over his knee, the Codex open on his lap. He thumbs a page as if he's browsing a wine list.

"There she is." His mouth curves into the specific smile I used to mistake for warmth. "Look at my little contamination."

My stomach drops through the floor.

"We must fix that." He taps the open page with one finger, tilting it so I can see the header: *Book Four: Emergency Protocols for Emotional Contamination*. The words blur, sharpen, then blur again as my head throbs where I was struck.

Blood pools against my teeth. I spit it at his shoes.

"Fuck you."

Emeric laughs, genuine and delighted, as he did when I nailed a field test back when I thought he hung the goddamn moon. He snaps the Codex shut and sets it on the floor beside his chair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"That fire. That's exactly the contamination talking, Ivanya. You used to be so clean." He studies my face, most likely deciding where to cut. "Disciplined and mine."

"I was never yours."

"Page forty-seven disagrees." He stands, brushing dust from his thighs, and crosses to a panel on the wall. His fingers hover over a dial. "Thankfully, I prepared for this day. Kind of anticipated it, really. I mean, you were my greatest weapon, but even the great can be weak when it comes to love."

He turns the dial.

"So just a few small adjustments, and you'll be fixed."

The sound screams through my ears, a high-frequency that drills into the center of my skull.

I clamp my jaw shut, but it doesn't help. The sound climbs, threading through bone, sinuses, and the soft tissue behind my eyes.

Chains rattle as my body jerks. I can't cover my ears or do a single fucking thing except hang here while the sound peels me open layer by layer.

Emeric returns to his chair, crossing his ankle over his knee, watching me with way too much patience that I know he's capable of.

Everything goes dark.

I come back braced for the burn in my wrists and the strain in my shoulders. My feet meet concrete, dragging a sob of relief from my throat before leather digs into my ankles.

Straps bind my thighs and waist. One band crushes my chest against the wall, my legs spread and pinned. My arms stay trapped at my sides, both wrists buckled.

I test one restraint. It doesn't give. The room tips with my head, and the walls become every safehouse, training room, and cell I've ever been inside. Nonna's hands pull me into a dough-floured hug. Jord cracks jokes over the comms. Punk wears that stupid grin. Their faces lose their names, thinning into smoke until numbness comes easy.

A violent jerk of my head clears them. *Stay here, Ivy.*

Emeric sits in his chair with the Codex open, calmly turning another page. The fluorescent bar hums. My own breath comes too loud in my ears.

"Pain," he says, lifting his eyes from the page and settling on my face. "You've forgotten that feeling since your prince is so hell-bent on protecting you."

I keep my mouth shut.

"You know? I did warn him." He shifts the book to his other knee, unhurried. "Warned him that I would kill you if he didn't. But Asher..." He tsks. My shoulders pull tight at the familiar sound.

They know each other.

Emeric knows him well enough to say his name with affection, well enough to have warned him. Everything I understood about my employer splits open beneath my feet.

"He's always so quick to be a smart-ass, huh?" Emeric smiles at a private memory of Asher being Asher.

My tongue feels thick. “How long?”

“How long what, Ivanya?”

“How long have you known him?”

He stands, setting the Codex on the chair, and crosses the floor slowly. He brings nothing with him but his cologne and the strike of his shoes on concrete, a walk I’ve heard a thousand times across training rooms and beside debrief tables. That sound used to relax me. *You idiot. You were in the abattoir the whole time.*

His hand closes around my throat.

His fingers press into the sides of my neck, choking the air out of me. My hips jerk against the straps. My throat works uselessly, and the room dims at the edges.

“I know Asher.” His voice brushes my ear with tenderness. “Ivy. And you do too...”

My vision closes fast.

Warm water rocks beneath me, carrying salt on the air.

The little boy’s hands try to undo the ties. He huffs in frustration, dropping his hands to his sides.

“I can’t get them!” he yells, so angry I almost believe him.

“What are you doing here?” I ask through the throb in my throat. “Are you...”

His eyes widen. Blue, so pale they’re practically white. Wow. They’re kind of creepy.

“I’m sorry,” he says, shoulders sagging.

“Are you his son?” I ask.

The little boy’s head jerks toward the cabin door. His wet hair drips into those strange blue eyes.

“I’m getting you out,” he insists, reaching for the rope again.

“His son,” Emeric answers.

His voice hauls me out of the memory. The yacht drops away. Concrete chills my feet, leather cuts into my thighs, and Emeric stands close enough for his breath to touch my cheek.

I stare at him through the wet blur coating my eyes.

“What?”

Emeric cups my jaw, holding my face toward his. “The boy was Parker’s son. He wasn’t freeing you, Ivanya. He was checking the knots.”

“No.” My lips form the word while my head sways. “He got angry because he couldn’t untie them.”

“He got angry because he failed Parker.” Emeric runs his thumb over the blood drying beneath my mouth. “Asher always hated disappointing his father.”

My stomach caves at the name.

Asher was eleven years old, soaked from the sea and fumbling with ropes. He stood in the conservatory with my blood on his hands. He watched me run through the snow.

I grab one memory and hold it.

Emeric’s burned mouth bends. “He’s always helped with recruiting, Ivanya. Children trust other children. Parker understood that. Asher became quite good at bringing frightened little girls into reach.”

“You’re lying.” My voice cracks, giving him the satisfaction of hearing it. “Parker never called him his son. I never met Asher before then.”

“Parker didn’t call you his wife either.” Emeric releases me, pulling the Codex from the chair. “Titles change. Purpose survives.”

He opens the book, pressing a finger against a page covered in names, ranks, and arrows. The letters crawl when I look at them.

“La Maison du Mal has three houses,” Emeric explains. “Delacroix presents the clean face. Companies, charities, family empires. They invite powerful people through the front door and decide which ones leave indebted.”

His finger moves to a name printed above the rest.

ASHER.

Beneath it is a title.

LE PARRAIN.

Emeric taps the ink. “Your lover boy that is nothing like the men you despise?”

I shake my head, making the page smear. “He...” I want to say *kills them*. That can’t be right. He was a child. He can’t be Le Boucher. He has to be what Emeric says.

“Shall I continue?” Emeric’s smile widens around ruined skin.

His finger slides across the paper.

“Monét owns the dark corners. Intelligence, technology, Ciphers, Watchers, Fantômes. They bury records, build identities, and send people through locked rooms without leaving a footprint.”

His finger moves to another family.

“And Dubois handles the mind.” Emeric lifts his gaze to mine. “False memory implantation. Personality fracturing. Trauma harvesting. They take a life apart, rewrite the useful pieces, and hand it back.”

My wrists twist against the straps.

“That boy helped me.” The rest of his lecture passes unheard while I hold tight to that one thread.

“That boy *recruited* you,” Emeric says, closing the book. “He then gave you hope so Parker could teach you what it feels like to have it ripped away.”

A sob catches behind my tongue.

Emeric leans closer, his burned cheek filling my vision. “He is La Maison du Mal, Ivanya.”

Water clouds my eyes again. His face blurs, the scarred skin smoothing at the edges until a beard and a familiar nose take shape.

I blink, and the burns return.

High heels clap against the concrete, pulling a sneer across my mouth.

“Why are you messing around?” Camille says. “Just say the trigger word and let the crazy play.”

Emeric’s eyes shift toward her. He straightens. “No, not yet. She’s not ready.”

“Fine. Let me try.” She pulls up a chair.

Her mouth moves while my head keeps circling the same pieces: Asher as the little boy, the recruiter, Le Parrain, and the *liar*.

“Ivanya, you and I aren’t friends. In fact, I’d prefer to just kill you and get this over with, but Emeric is so hell-bent on living the Dubois way, so let me give you a hint of how this is going to go.”

My eyes fix on her.

She grins. “Asher is in love with me.”

My jaw loosens.

“We’re always going to be number one.”

I sag against the leather.

Emeric steps into view, studying me. His burned skin smooths around his eyes. A familiar nose follows, then a smile.

The corner of his mouth lifts into a wide grin. “What is it, my Mariée?”

My head moves once from side to side. The final thread in my brain pulls apart.

“Ivanya, you’re such a special girl. You’re going to be so much help one day. You want to help Daddy, right?” He smiles up at me. I loved when Daddy smiled, especially his eyes and that funny dent on his nose.

Leather bites my wrists. Blood dries beneath my nose. Camille sits a few feet away, one heel tucked behind the leg of her chair as she watches.

My ribs loosen. The raw place inside my chest goes quiet. The boy on the yacht slips out of reach, taking his blue eyes and wet hair with him. Asher follows. Nonna’s kitchen goes next, then Jord and Punk. The faces blend into darkness, and I let them.

I lift my head, looking straight at him. “Dad?”

Emeric’s smile spreads. His burned cheek pulls tight beside his teeth, and pride brightens the eyes I’ve spent years obeying. “I knew it.”

He leans close, giving me the words he buried where no one else could reach them. “Sic ’em.”

My pulse stalls before the next beat slams through me, clearing the black from my vision.

Names, promises, rules, and fragile human attachments strip away. Pain reduces to information: pressure at both wrists, low blood flow in my left hand, buckle pins facing out, three inches of slack near my waist.

Camille starts breathing faster. I remember Asher’s hands, his mouth, and the diamond on my finger. I remember shooting him and crying over his body.

Ivanya loved him.

I don’t know her.

My fingers curl, testing the leather again. The buckle at my right wrist shifts against the wall, revealing cheap hardware. Emeric expects the trigger to keep me obedient. Stronger restraints would have been a waste.

He’s right.

Camille shoots out of her chair, the legs shrieking across concrete. She retreats until her back meets the wall, one hand clamped over her mouth. Her eyes drag across my face, searching for the woman she came in to taunt.

That woman is gone.

“Mariée de la Mort.” Camille’s voice breaks around the name.

I watch her swallow. The pulse beneath her jaw beats fast. Nine feet separate us, with one chair in the path. She has a slight limp to her right. I could put her down before she reaches the door.

Emeric steps between us, blocking my view of her. He places two fingers beneath my chin and tips my face toward the fluorescent light, inspecting his work.

“There you are, my Mariée.” Satisfaction softens his mouth. “Tell me who you belong to.”

“You,” I say.

He releases my chin. “And Asher?”

A blue stare flashes across the dark, followed by his wicked mouth and the warmth of his hand around mine.

“Target,” I answer.

He reaches for the strap across my chest, sliding his thumb under the buckle.

“What are you going to do, Mariée?”

I look into my father’s eyes. “I’m going to kill them all.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ASHER

IVY HAS LEFT traces of herself all over this house. A black hair tie looped around the lamp stem, a thumbnail nick in the coffee table from her little party tantrum. Counting each one keeps my fist out of Atlas's face, since he won't shut the fuck up.

Atlas paces across the rug, grinding snow from his boots. "I told you." He spreads his hands. "I fucking told you not to let her run off."

My fingers close around the armrest. "Shut the fuck up."

"You stood there and watched her go." Atlas kicks the rug, missing by half an inch. "Barefoot. In a storm. After she just figured out who the fuck you are."

I stop rocking. "You're one shitty comment away from me fucking you up, Atlas."

Atlas stops behind the sofa. "You're sitting still. That's fucking terrifying. How the fuck is doing the opposite of what we should be doing keeping you calm?"

"It's working," I tell him. "I'm only considering one murder."

His mouth twists. "Hilarious."

Someone hammers on the front door.

Atlas reaches inside his coat.

I rise, the chair still rocking without me. "If you shoot whoever found her, I'll be annoyed."

"If they hurt her, you'll be more than annoyed," Atlas mutters, following me into the hall.

I unlock the door and pull it open.

Leon stands on the step, Punk at his left in a beanie. Luce grips Punk's elbow, and Jord shoves to the front of them, fury hardening his face.

"What is happening?"

"I'm sure your friends have a lot to tell you," I say to Jord, lifting a brow at Leon.

"Shut up, Delacroix," Leon snaps, pushing inside with the rest trailing behind him.

I slam the door shut.

"Why the fuck did you let her run?" Leon asks, clinking bottles at the bar in the corner of the living room.

Here we go. Another fucking round of questions.

"I didn't," I say, snatching the freshly poured whiskey and dropping back into the rocking chair. "I was going to get her but she was gone."

"Hmmm." Punk gives me a slow nod. "Sounds about right. But *why the fuck did she run in the first place!*"

I pause with the glass at my mouth. Punk's face loses color.

"Because she made me."

Silence. That's what the fuck I thought.

Luce blows out a breath, dropping onto the back of the sofa. "Okay. Think. Is it possible that he caught her?"

"Surely not," Punk says, shaking her head, while Jord's eyes swing between his friends, desperate to piece it all together. "If he did," she continues. "We would know by now, right? Emeric is far too fucking theatrical to not make a scene by now."

"It's been thirty-five minutes," I say, hissing through the burn. "Don't count him out too soon."

Luce's gaze narrows on me. "Now, you're awfully fucking calm, Asher. May I ask why?"

"You may." I shrug, emptying the glass down my throat. "But I won't tell you."

"Oh, this is a thing he does when he's trying to stay logical," Atlas adds, sarcasm riding under it. "I'm sure he's going to explode sooner or later."

I won't. He knows that.

"He won't," Leon murmurs, unbuttoning his jacket and lowering himself onto the sofa, eyes on me. "Even as kids he never did."

Punk taps furiously at her keyboard.

“Okay that’s it!” Jord shouts, shoving off the wall. “What the fuck is going on and why do you all know each other?”

I open my mouth to answer, and someone knocks again.

“Fuck!” Punk screams, slamming her laptop. “I can’t get in anywhere near where he is!”

I head for the front door and let our newest guest in while Punk blabbers about being a failure.

I wave a hand toward her. “I bring you someone who does know how to get in over there.” Everyone turns to the woman beside me. “Meet Amélie Monét.”

Amélie smiles, but I know I’m gonna get an earful later.

“Ivy’s mother,” I add.

“Great,” Luce snaps, turning her back to Amélie. “Just what we need. A fucking deadbeat.”

“That’s it!” Jord yells. “Where the fuck is my friend and why the fuck are you all liars!”

I glare at Leon. “Explain the shit to him before he starts giving me a headache.”

Leon doesn’t move. He studies Jord for a beat, giving the poor bastard one final breath before dropping his entire life into a blender.

“Emeric is Ivy’s father,” Leon says, resting his forearms on his knees. “He trained her as a child, buried commands in her head, and spent years sending us jobs so he could keep her close.”

Jord’s mouth opens.

Punk lifts one finger from her laptop. “And Asher runs the Delacroix house.”

Jord turns toward me, his face going blank. “Runs it how?”

I roll the empty glass between my palms. “Le Parrain.”

“Supreme leader,” Luce adds, aiming the words at Jord while her stare stays fixed on Amélie. “Since nobody in this room seems fond of plain fucking English.”

Amélie walks past her and puts a silver case on the dining table. “Plain English tends to upset people.”

Luce follows, muttering, “Your existence upsets me.”

Amélie flips the latches. Inside sits a slim black terminal, three encrypted drives, and enough illegal hardware to get a normal person buried under federal charges.

Punk drags her chair beside Amélie, flipping her laptop open again, teal hair slipping from beneath her beanie as she leans over the case. “You built a closed relay?”

“I built six,” Amélie answers, connecting a cable to Punk’s laptop. “Emeric knows the first four.”

Luce gives her another hard look. “Gold star for motherhood.”

Amélie’s hand stalls over the keyboard.

Punk clears her throat, sliding a drive into place. “I’m going to act like we’re not one insult away from becoming a crime scene.”

The front door bangs open, blowing snow across the entry tiles.

Khloe storms inside with ice stuck to her lashes, kicking the door shut behind her. “Still no tracks past what we know. The wind’s filling everything.”

My chair hits the floor. “Where did you look?”

“Tree line, springs, ridge, eastern access road.” Khloe digs into her coat, pulling out a phone. “Found this, though.”

She tosses it.

I catch Ivy’s phone against my chest.

Snow packs the cracked corner of the case. Her lock screen stays black when I press the button, and a thin smear of blood marks the volume switch. Mine, hers, anyone’s. Every answer ends with me killing someone.

“Where exactly?” I ask, turning the phone over.

Khloe strips off one glove with her teeth. “Fifty yards into the forest, screen down.”

“So she dropped it while running,” Atlas says from behind me.

Khloe shakes her head. “Her footprints stop after that point. There was some blood...”

Leon rises from the sofa. “We’re on a timer.”

I lift my eyes to him, closing my fist around Ivy’s phone.

Leon looks across the room. “If Emeric has her, we’re all dead if he unleashes her. Ivy won’t hesitate, and no amount of *les amants maudits* is gonna change that.”

Yeah. I’m beginning to think he’s right.

CHAPTER THIRTY

ASHER

GLOCKS DECORATE my dining room for the second day. Two fucking days and we've heard nothing, which tells us everything. She's with Emeric. Who *she* is now is anyone's guess, if we go by what Leon's been spitting about Emeric triggering her bride-of-death side.

Punk hasn't eaten. Nobody has, much less showered, and I'm about three side-eyes from Khloe away from ripping this island apart with my bare hands. Fuck my ancestors, duty, and anyone who gets in my way.

It's as good a time as any, since Atlas has killed my Macallan. The fact that he chose my most expensive bottle tells me he wanted to make this my problem too. At least he's reached the quiet, philosophical stage of drunk, which in Atlas means depressed and useless. One less person I'd have to punch through if I do decide to go rogue.

"Move the handoff to relay three," Amélie says, not looking up.

"Relay three is burned," my mother answers from the other end of the table. "You know it's burned."

"He torched four relays, Elea. Three still has the secondary node—"

"Which he's had forty-eight hours to find. You're sending Punk into a graveyard."

"I'm sending her into a network I built." Amélie's la conseillère role crawls out through her exhaustion. "Trust my architecture or find another Monét. There are so many of us to choose from."

Elea's jaw tightens.

Leon doesn't look up when I drop into the chair across from him. He's on his fourth gun. Slide, spring, barrel, oil, reassemble, repeat. The rhythm is the only calm thing in this house.

"You're going to wear the finish off," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Keeps my hands busy." Click. "You should try it. You've been pacing since six."

He means pacing like a caged animal, and he's right. My leg won't stop bouncing. My fingers drum the table, and every ninety seconds I check my phone even though it's been dead silent for two days.

Two mother-fucking days.

She's alive. I know she's alive. There's no point in going through everything he has just to kill her, even if he did order the hit on her in the first place.

"Punk." Amélie sits back from her keyboard. Guns stop clicking as Atlas lifts his head off the couch. "Run the node scan again. From the top."

"I've run it nine times."

"Run it again. The last pass came back wrong."

Punk's hands stop moving. "Wrong how?"

"Fast." Amélie turns the monitor, and I get up, crossing the room before I've decided to. Lines of code scroll past. I don't read code, but I read Amélie Monét, and she's gone very still. "Every time we probe his perimeter, it closes before we touch it. That response time isn't automated."

"It's a person," Elea says.

"It's not a person." Amélie looks up at me, and the thing I've been refusing to say out loud for two days is sitting right there in her eyes. "No Cipher alive is that fast. It knows how I think. It knows how Punk thinks."

"Is she alive?" The words barely make it out.

Amélie nods once. "She's alive."

Khloe drops her head back against the wall and lets out a breath she's clearly been holding since she came in with Ivy's phone. "Okay. Okay, so then what's the play? Because I don't get what he gains here. Ivy's not a nut case. She's not going to walk into a room and blow us all up because Daddy asked nicely."

"Ivy's not, no." Luce says it quietly, and every head turns.

She's got her knees pulled up in the armchair, sleeves stretched over her hands, and she looks at Khloe almost gently. "*Mariée de la mort* is. That's

the whole point of her. I've seen the notes Nonna kept. He didn't teach Ivy to kill. He built a second person underneath the first one and gave her the same face. The second one doesn't get scared or tired, and she'll look straight through us like we're strangers."

Leon sets his rag down. "Emeric spent eleven years layering it in during dissociative states. It's woven all the way through her, down in the wiring. If he has in fact managed to get his hands on her, she could love you in the morning and put a round in your eye at noon, and the girl at noon wouldn't remember the girl at breakfast existed."

I lean forward with my elbows on my knees, because I've been waiting two days to say this to somebody's face.

"For the record, this is exactly why the fuck I didn't want shit blowing up too early."

Khloe's head snaps around. "Tell that to your dick. I took her out for one drink, Ash. One. And by the time I got her home you'd fucked her into a brand-new bullet wound."

Atlas chokes on nothing.

Jord makes a sound that dies halfway.

"That's not—"

"It's exactly what happened."

Amélie clears her throat, and the room shuts up. "You're both wasting breath arguing about timing." She closes the laptop halfway, and the screen light goes out of her face. "Emeric doesn't have a plan. He has an appetite. Everything he's built for years exists to feed one thing, and it isn't power."

"Revenge," my mother says.

"Revenge on me," Amélie corrects. "You should understand what she is to him, so I'm going to start here. I didn't know I was pregnant."

Punk's hands come off the keyboard.

"This should be good," Luce grumbles, rolling her eyes.

Amélie continues. "To cut a very long story short, I was in a coma when I became pregnant, and during the birth."

Everyone fucking stops, like the oxygen just got sucked out of the room. Too bad Ivy doesn't know this already, and sure, this is most likely going to trigger another round of foreplay sparring before I hate-fuck her into forgiving me, but it was never my story to tell.

Not that she's gonna give a fuck about that.

Amélie's thumb moves once against the edge of the table. "When Nonna found me, I was still in the deep sleep, hooked up to monitors in his bedroom, but there was no sign of a child. She woke me, snuck me out, and didn't look back. We didn't know about Ivy until Nonna saw her on the yacht." She blinks back the tears in her eyes. "She said the resemblance was just too much."

"But—wait—" Luce shakes her head. "So you didn't run off with Emeric and then leave her there to save yourself?"

I don't know who the fuck Luce has been talking to, but that's not the original story. My father, Emeric, and Aléia meant to bury the Monét name the second Emeric got the chance.

Amélie jerks back. "No, Lucinda. That was one of the many planted stories, but no. I imagine he was going to wake me when the time came, to train Ivy, which I would have, as I am obliged to do. He would have killed me the second she inherited the knowledge. He never wanted a child. He wanted a Monét. Our architecture, our relays, our intelligence lines—all of it, placed into a body he could aim."

Luce blurts, "Why the hell would you date him in the first place?"

"I never dated him," Amélie answers, fatigue thick in her tone.

"Luce." I don't raise my voice. "She's innocent in this, all the way down. She didn't have a choice, so drop it."

Luce's mouth closes.

"So it ruined his plans when Nonna took you," Punk whispers, staring blankly at the wall. "And forced him to go through other avenues, but when none worked—" she waves her hand toward me. "—he decided she was worthless."

"But Ivy still doesn't have the knowledge or codes or whatever! Because she doesn't even know Amélie is alive!" Damn. Luce is trying every way she can to not like Amélie, and I get it.

"Actually..." Amélie says, stopping us all. "She does. Nonna was a great teacher. Ivy herself doesn't even know she has the knowledge. Nonna planted it in lessons, very slowly, weaving it carefully through her training. When the time is right," she pauses, nodding at me, "she will have everything she needs."

"What does this *mean*?" Jord's hands go up. "I've known that girl since I was fourteen years old and nobody in this fucking room will tell me who

she is other than the woman I fucking know! Which even during Plays, she was *never* anything different!”

“—because he hadn’t fucking triggered that part of her yet, Jord! Stay up!” Luce snaps.

“You know what?” He flips her off. “Fuck you. Fuck—”

My phone chimes, and I dig it out of my pocket.

Unknown number. Just a video file, sitting there with a play button over a frozen frame of gray concrete.

I press play.

Ivy hangs from her wrists in the middle of a room I recognize before the camera even pans. Dovecrest. Her toes drag across the concrete, her head hanging forward, sweat pasting her hair to her face. She’s been up there too fucking long. A mechanical whine runs under the feed in cycles. Every spike seizes her whole body against the restraints.

“Ash?” Atlas sits up. “What is it?”

I can’t answer.

Camille slides in from the left and plants her hand against Ivy’s ribs, dragging it up while she speaks into Ivy’s ear. Can’t hear shit; the voices have been cut, leaving nothing but that frequency.

Ivy shakes against the chains with no control over any of it.

Cross-trauma. Every response caged, poked, prodded: every memory that caused it hitting her at once. Emeric is forcing her to relive all of it so he can condition her to obey him again.

The whine spikes, and Ivy’s mouth opens on a scream I can’t fucking hear.

“Asher.” Amélie’s voice drifts from somewhere far off. “Asher, what are you—”

My hands are shaking. The phone slips out of them and hits the floor with a thud, and everyone rushes for it in slow motion.

“Oh God,” Punk breathes.

I snatch the two semi-autos off the table, slinging one and carrying the other, and grab three magazines, jamming them into my waistband without slowing down.

“Ash—” Atlas lunges off the couch. “Ash, it’s bait, you know it’s bait—”

I don’t give a fuck what it is. It’s her, in pain, and me, sitting here doing nothing.

Daniel and Sinead are climbing off the snowmobile as I slam the front door closed. They've been out searching for hours for nothing. I should have known to go straight to fucking Dovecrest from the beginning.

"You wanna put a shirt on, boss?" Sinead calls after me.

Fuck no. What I want is to rip Emeric, Camille, and her fucking mother apart.

And I will.

ONE-NINETY ON THE speedometer and the Aston's still pulling. Snow comes off the rear tires in two white plumes, the heater cranked against my bare chest.

Khloe's been screaming through the speakers since I left.

"—actual stupidest motherfucker alive, I swear to God, Asher, pull over and I mean it—"

"Khloe, fucking relax!"

Snow sweeps across the road, hiding the faded center line. I steer from one clean patch of asphalt to the next, pushing the Aston through the winding roads between Veilarath and Désamour. The rear tires slip through a bend, catching again when I ease off for half a second.

Half a second is probably pushing it...

"Asher!" my sister snaps. The irritation would be perfect rage bait if I wasn't dead fucking serious about getting to Ivy. "HE SENT IT TO YOU."

I wince.

Her voice cracks the speaker. "You are being stupid and fucking erratic and—" she pauses. "Oh my God you're giving Atlas right now!"

That kills all the smugness in my chest.

"What do you want, Khlo," I say. "For me to pull over and give Emeric another hour with her?"

"No." Pause. "Just twelve minutes until we catch up."

"Sounds like I need to take you driving again. You're a bit rusty..."

"Ash," Khloe groans. "You go in alone, he gets exactly what he wants."

I laugh. "I don't give a fuck because he already has what I want."

The video replays inside my head.

I press harder on the accelerator until I reach two thirty-five.

Punk pipes in, "I've got your car on the map, and something's blocking me past the tunnel."

A bend rushes toward me. I brake late, turning into it while the back end drifts wide enough to put the left tires near the drop. The stone barrier flashes past my window. Below it, several hundred feet of mountain and a funeral Khloe would destroy.

I correct the slide, accelerating out.

Khloe releases a rough breath.

"You're half-dressed, armed, and driving on ice," she says. "This is a tantrum with horsepower."

The road straightens, giving me a clear view of the mountain ahead. A dark concrete tunnel cuts into its base, the entrance wide enough for two cars and hidden from the main route by dead pines.

I've never driven into Dovecrest myself. Waking up here, though, that I've done, and I gotta admit it was easier than this.

"Found the location data," Punk says. Keys tap through the call. "The file pinged from Dovecrest, then passed through two Monet relays before it hit your phone."

"I know."

"How?" Khloe asks, though I kind of expected her to wonder where the fuck I was going six sentences ago.

I crack my neck. "Because I recognized the room."

Silence takes the call for three seconds.

Khloe speaks first. "What room?"

She knows what happened to me that year. I've just never said it out loud. "The conditioning ward."

Punk stops typing.

Khloe flattens her tone. "Turn around."

I laugh once. "Good chat."

"Asher, that ward has remote control over every electronic system —"

"My car isn't registered."

Punk cuts in. "Your car could be registered to a ghost and Emeric would still have access to it."

The tunnel mouth swells in the windshield, a strip of black asphalt running into total darkness.

"Punk," I say, checking the mirror.

No headlights behind me. They're farther back than Khloe claimed. Lying runs in the family, even among the ones I don't want to strangle.

"Get into my system."

“I’m locked out!” she snaps, fingers hammering the keys again.

She’s never locked out. She’s the one who does the locking.

“Someone changed the access key six seconds ago.”

The entrance fills the windshield.

“Asher, brake,” Khloe says, tone way too calm for screaming Sally from earlier.

I drop into second and floor it. The engine revs hard, shoving me back into the seat. Tires spit dirty snow across the tunnel floor as I cross inside. My headlights catch damp walls and an old security camera angled straight at the driver’s seat.

“Wave,” I say, flipping it off.

“Brake!” Khloe shouts.

The road drops lower the deeper I go, the tunnel swallowing what’s left of the daylight behind me. The display flickers once. Punk’s name vanishes. Khloe’s voice breaks into clipped pieces, two words arriving out of order before the connection dies.

My headlights catch a warning sign bolted to the damp wall.

SHARP TURN — 100 FT.

I ease off and downshift, taking enough speed out to make the corner.

I put my foot on the brake and the pedal goes soft. “What—”

Fifty feet.

The center display turns white.

My foot’s still on the brake, but the accelerator pushes itself to the floor, launching the car forward.

“What the fuck?”

The wheel rips out of my hands.

It cranks full right on its own, tires screaming against the camber, and the throttle stays buried with my boot nowhere near it. I lock both arms around it and wrench left. The wheel fights back, turning itself while the corner arrives through my windshield.

Punk bursts back through. “ASHER, THE CAR’S—”

Her voice cuts out.

A new audio file opens on the display. Ivy laughs as the Aston mounts the curb and strikes the tunnel wall.

Concrete fills the windshield, dropping away when the car rolls, glass spitting over my face before everything goes to black.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

IVY

DEATH WAS NEVER GOING to come easy for me, even though I'd spread my legs for it on multiple occasions.

Humanity. Such a fickle inconvenience.

The blade lands in my open palm with every flick while the ocean throws itself against the glass wall of this *awfully* sanitized hellhole.

"Are you worried?" the pest opposite me asks, sprawled across a two-seater sofa with her arms spread wide.

I smirk, holding her smug stare. "Not as worried as you should be, considering it's just you and I in here—" I tilt my head and pretend to examine her posture. "—and would you look at that? You're already in the Blood Eagle stance."

Her mouth drops at the same time as her arms.

I roll my eyes and go back to my knife. I'm bored and understimulated. Silly me for thinking Emeric would unleash me onto the streets. Of course he has a plan.

Over the past two days I've picked up plenty. For one, everything in this place is sterile. Polished concrete, deep-set LED strips. The main hallway loops on and on with no visible doors, yet walls open up for you if you press on them right.

Strange mind-fuck of a building.

This room is different. A whole wall made of glass where I'm guessing the cliff used to be.

Camille sighs, pushing up from the sofa. "I need to use the bathroom."

“Cool!” I ignore her, annoyed with her overshare.

What the fuck is taking Emeric so long anyway?

I reach for the phone on the small table, tapping the screen a few times before putting it back.

Camille returns just as the main door slams open on Aléia, and behind her, Emeric.

It takes me a second to look at what he’s pushing in, and when my eyes land on the gurney, I lift slowly out of my chair.

“What is this?” I ask, catching the blade at the handle without taking my eyes off him.

A bloody arm slides to the side, and—wait. I recognize those tattoos.

He’s not moving.

Thud. Thud.

“This!” Emeric gestures to him like a prized fucking fish he caught. “Is your gift.”

My mouth snaps shut.

He must read my expression because his brows dip inward. “Yes, for your hard work. Now, come...”

I can’t move. My muscles seize, everything in me locking up.

“Marieee...” he drawls, his voice drifting in and out. “Do I have to repeat myself?”

“Not at all,” I say, blinking up at my father.

I tighten my grip on the blade. Each step hits somewhere in my fucking chest.

Odd. Would prefer it not do that.

Metallic hits my nose, mixed with... what is that?

One more step and his face comes into view. Split lip, blood dried into his eyebrow, lashes stuck together with it. My fingers go numb around the handle.

“Jesus, you’re slow—here! I’ll fucking do it!” Camille shoulder-barges past me but doesn’t get far before I grab her by the hair and tug her back.

“Ouch!” she screams, stepping back behind me.

Another step.

The blade in my left sheath finds my hand, and without looking away from Asher, I slice clean across Aléia’s throat.

Camille’s screams erupt behind me, people moving at the edge of my vision. No doubt Emeric has slithered off like a fucking snake, but I don’t

care. I don't care about a fucking thing except that he's...

I drop to Asher's side, cupping his head. "Oh my God. What did he do?" I whisper, his blood once again on my hands.

Asher laughs, and then winces, clutching where the piece is sticking out of his side.

I slap his hand away. "Leave it! It's what's stopping you from bleeding out."

Punk stares at Asher. "Ivy! We need to—"

"—I'm fucking fine!" Asher snaps, trying to sit up. "You and me!" He glares. "We gotta talk."

I narrow my eyes. "Mmmm, maybe we should knock him out..."

His hand flies to my throat and he pulls me close to his face. "Unless you're gonna do that by riding my dick to sleep, I'd suggest you fucking don't. Atlas!" he yells, keeping his eyes fixed on me.

Atlas crashes through the door, takes one look at Asher, and his face pales.

"Get—Ivy—out!"

I open my mouth.

"—and Camille."

It snaps shut, and cold crawls up the back of my neck.

Asher's mouth tips. "Oh, not so smug now?"

"Fuck you."

And I mean it, because when all this adrenaline dies and I know Asher is fine, we really are gonna fight.

"Later," he mutters, pushing himself upright on the gurney.

Khloe looks between me and him. "Asher, you really should lay down."

He bares his teeth, blood drying at the corner of his mouth. "I'm fine. Had worse in the ring with Sinead."

Pushing off the gurney, he gets all the way up to full height, bare chest smeared red, and for a second, I hate myself for being distracted by his body.

Amazing. Death all over the place and my brain still finds time to be depraved.

"Camille!" he snaps, and Camille's whimpers stop from somewhere behind me. "You need to come stitch me up before Punk takes you."

I freeze.

He hasn't looked away from me, and with every passing second, rage builds deep in my belly. I'm still pissed about him knowing Emeric was my father and keeping it from me, and now he's throwing gas on the fire with this bitch...

Camille's shoulders brush mine as she lifts her hand to his chest.

My hand shoots out, laying the flat edge of my blade under her chin without breaking eye contact with Asher.

That annoying fucking grin spreads over his face, and my jaw slams shut.

"If you even think of touching him, Cameltoe, I'll have you dead beside your mother."

"Baby..." Asher starts. "She's gotta touch me to fix me..."

I shrug. "I know other surgeons. Ones who don't know what you feel like inside them."

Asher shoves Camille away, taking me by the chin with a bloody hand. "How do you feel?"

"What?" Out of everything I expected him to say, that wasn't on the list.

"How..." His lips skim mine and my heart races. "Do..." He kisses me and I melt. "You feel?"

"I feel—" I pause, stepping back—

I stare at my hands. Blood. Asher's blood.

I touch his chest. "Alive."

Alive.

The word leaves me and the room slips sideways. My hand stays splayed over Asher's chest, his heart hammering under blood and skin, and the walls inside my brain split open.

"Ivy," he says close to my mouth. *Too close.*

Cold air cuts my throat. Branches slap my arms. Snow sinks under my bare feet as I run with no plan except away, away, away from the house, from his lies, from the look on that woman's face when she—the woman.

Sharp cheekbones. Green eyes.

"I don't understand—" I stumble backwards, squeezing my eyes shut like it might drag me out of this nightmare.

"*You see this?*" Emeric said, gesturing to the same picture of the same woman. God, what was his deal with her? "*When you see this face, what will you do?*"

I didn't even answer because what?

“Ivy, look at me.” Asher’s thumb presses under my jaw. The touch almost pulls me out. Almost.

It had been a month since he last pulled out her photo, but here he was again.

“Who is this woman!” Emeric yelled so loud my ears rang.

I stared at the picture, like a cloud going over my head. Blank. Void. “A trigger.”

“Who is also...” he asked, eyeing me.

I looked up at him. “My mother.”

He clicked his fingers.

Tears burn my eyes as the room around me softens.

Asher steps closer, and the night I ran from him drags me back under.

Once I’m far enough from my mother, I walk through trees. I walk down the mountain road. Ice cuts my soles open and gravel grinds into raw skin, leaving blood across snow, dirt, and pavement, and I don’t feel a damn thing. The tunnel waits at the bottom of the road.

Fluorescent lights buzz overhead, the concrete damp under my feet. My footprints smear red behind me.

I don’t look back.

I know where I’m going.

Shit. “I know where I’m going.”

A black security panel sits beside a steel door I’ve never seen, except my palm lifts to it on its own, fingers spread, hand steady. The reader flashes green.

“He put my biometrics into the—” My hands wave around the room, everyone watching me. “I don’t know when...”

The door opens, carrying bleach and metal. Beyond it, the conditioning ward.

Cuffs hang from a ceiling rail, leather worn dark at the edges, chains already lowered to the right height. I step beneath them. I lift my arms. No command. No struggle.

I slide one wrist in.

Click.

Then the other.

Click.

The chains draw tight, taking my weight until I’m hanging by the wrists, toes brushing the floor, shoulders pulling hot in their sockets. Skin splits

under the cuff. I feel the facts of it without the pain, the same way I feel cold glass with a glove on.

I did this.

“Ivy.”

Asher again, somewhere past the ward and the blood, except the memory keeps going because there are footsteps outside the room. Two sets. One heavy, one quick. I know the second from the scrape in her heel before Camille says my name, and the latch starts to turn.

“Finally,” she mutters. “What an entrance, but at least the trigger finally happened, whatever it was.”

I ignore her rambling. Camille was the perfect puppet. Glad I never killed her.

“Since no one knew what the hell Emeric’s trigger was—what was it, by the way?” she asks, turning her face to me as the door opens and her mother steps inside.

“It was Amelie. Emeric didn’t use a word, it was an image of her own mother. One he wanted to kill.” Aléia smirks. “Poetry, really...”

“I don’t—” I shake my head, the room refusing to hold still.

Voices overlap. Asher grabs my arm. “It’s Nonna, her counter weave broke through...”

“Love, Ivy... love is what sets everyone free. That’s why we do La Journée du Nous.”

I think over what she says. “But I don’t want to love...”

It was the easiest answer.

Nonna chuckles, pointing to Jord. “I think you do.”

“I don’t even know who I am,” I mutter, kind of annoyed.

I already cared for Nonna, loved her enough. Love means order and control. Nonna is order, Emeric is control. Leon is the foundation I always land on, Luce is the walls that keep me safe, and Punk is the security. Love is a house of order and control. What the hell would Jord be useful for?

Nonna laughs under her breath, bending to my height and placing both hands on my shoulders.

Her eyes soften, pupils dilating. “When you don’t know who you are, ask yourself how you feel. The answer will tell you who’s in control.”

Everything snaps back to the room.

I can’t move.

“Oh my God...” I whisper, eyes lifting to Asher as the whole room falls to silence. “Emeric is already dead.”

“Yeah.” Asher stares back at me. “I made sure of it.”

I fall backwards, landing on a sofa.

My whole body shakes.

Désamour isn't in France.

It's here. It's been here the whole time. On Veilarath.

I dig my fingers into the upholstery, nails catching on the weave. This was Emeric's work. He'd ask me questions, then he'd *take the answers back*. He left me the facts because he needed me functional, and he stole the lines between them. The shape of the thing. The reason three houses mattered. The reason the families pretended to be separate when they were all just fingers on the same hand.

My stomach lurches.

La Maison du Mal. One machine with three heads.

The Monét line. The Delacroix line. The—God, the crest. Three sigils cut to fit each other, a puzzle I've been too stupid to assemble.

My eyes snap to Asher.

He's still standing there, watching me come apart. The scar across his throat catches the light, a pale rope of healed tissue that I've traced with my fingers, with my tongue, never asking the right question, never letting myself wonder why a man who answers to no one wears a mark like that.

The final initiation.

Everything seems miles beneath me, blood thudding in my ears. He let them cut him. He knelt, Asher knelt, and let a blade split his throat open. That was what it cost to become Le Parrain.

Le Parrain.

I look at him. The snowboarder, the brat, the man who fights me and kisses me, and underneath all of it, the head of the French mob. The one Emeric himself was so afraid of—

The dream that triggered all of this opens again in my head, different this time.

Emeric *didn't* claim Le Boucher.

I lift my hands in front of me like I'm holding that very same mugshot, only now it's a full, detailed sketch of a younger Asher.

My hand flies to my mouth to stop myself from spewing.

“I feel sick.”

“Baby...” Asher steps closer and I can’t even find the strength to push him away.

My eyes lift to his. “Liars.”

“Breathe,” Asher says, his voice distant.

I can’t breathe. I can’t stop the flood. Every locked door Emeric planted in my head is swinging open and the light pouring through burns, showing me the architecture of a cage I’ve been living in since I was old enough to hold a blade.

“There was a house that needed to be built, but first, it needed the foundation—” Emeric pointed to Leon, before landing on Luce, “and the walls, they need to be strong enough to keep everyone and everything out.” Then he landed on Punk. “Until it was time to play house.”

They all knew. Every single one of them fucking knew.

My mouth opens. Can I even be bothered arguing?

Betrayal slams into me all at once—every kiss, every fight, every fucking lie. Rage arrives right behind it and my arm is already moving.

I drive my fist into his cheek with a satisfying crack that shudders through my split knuckles.

Pain tears through my side, but I don’t care. My eyes stay on him, the rest of the room dropping away.

He laughs, and my knife clears its sheath before the sound dies. I drag the edge across his chest, drawing a thin line of blood.

“—Ivy!” Luce, I think, but I’m too locked in to care.

Asher’s mouth curves, smug. “Go on. Do it.” Silence. I wish I fucking could. I wish I could just be done with everything.

Sensing my hesitation, his lip twitches. “Camille!”

What the fuck!

My knife swings toward her, and he fills the space where her throat had been, blade tip pressed to his chest again.

My head jerks back. Of all his bullshit, this is what I’m most pissed about?

Who cares... I just am.

“You fucking protect her?” My voice lifts on the end.

“Oh shit...” Leon mumbles. “Someone should stop her.”

“Fuck no! Leave her.” That’s Khloe.

I shove him hard, he stumbles, and we both land on the floor. His laughter turns maniacal.

“You fucking done yet?” He spits blood on the floor, giving me a crimson smirk.

Shoving off him, I press my own fingers to my side, blood pulsing through the gaps.

I stagger upright and head straight for the couch where my other blade dropped.

Blood seeps through my shirt. Each step pulls, but adrenaline keeps me moving. *I will not show weakness.*

Asher props himself up on one elbow.

His grin spreads, then vanishes the second his eyes hit my side.

“Tell me that’s my blood and not yours?” he sneers. The crazy version of him gone, buried beneath the possessive asshole I know.

The blade flips in my palm like a trick, but Asher moves faster.

One hand catches my wrist and twists it inward. His other locks over the steel, gripping until skin splits. Blood wells between his fingers where the edge bites into his palm.

He wrenches the knife loose and it clatters across the concrete.

I’m about to swing a right hook when his full weight drives me to the ground, knocking all the air out of my lungs.

With one knee jammed into my hip and his bleeding hand pinning my wrist to the floor above my head, he holds me there like he’s afraid I’m going to bolt.

“Since I’m gonna go ahead and say your fucking stitches have torn,” Asher grinds out through his teeth, “and to limit the risk of you actually fucking bleeding out and killing yourself, I’m gonna spill some fucking facts.”

The floor drops out from under me.

His breath catches, but he keeps me still.

“I’m fucking sorry.” Asher shakes his head. “That I lied, that I hid shit from you, and that I’m a fucking disappointment, but mostly? Because he is your *father*.”

The words spread through my veins like poison.

“You can fucking kill me after for all I care.” His forehead skims mine. “But this time? Do a better fucking job because I can’t live with the fact that you hate me, Venom.”

Before I can punch him again, his fingers close around my wrist, deadlocking me mid-swing.

Asher...

"Let me go." It hurts. Everything fucking hurts. "Let me the fuck go—" A hiccup cuts in. "I hate you. I fucking hate you—"

"No, you don't," he replies with too much calm for someone I just fucked up.

He catches my other wrist, forcing both above my head until there's nothing left between us but his bare chest pressed to mine.

"I'll kill you." Tears stream down my face, blurring my vision. "I swear to God, I'll—"

"You won't." The words are warm against my mouth. He's everywhere. His weight and his scent pulling me back from wherever I'd gone.

"Let me go." My voice cracks around the rock in my throat. "Please."

He swallows, wincing. "Never."

His grip tightens on my wrists, his other hand sliding into my hair, tangling in the strands and pulling my head back until I have no choice but to look at him.

Blue eyes stare down at me, steady, his split lip still bleeding where I hit him.

"I told you." His thumb strokes along my hairline. "I'm never letting you go."

A shudder runs through me, and my hands go loose against his chest.

"He was my father," I sob, sniffing. "How could he?"

Asher's arms tighten around me. "I know, baby. I know."

It sounds ridiculous, to mourn a man who was a monster all along, but the little girl who thought he was the world had no idea what he was.

"Why didn't you tell me?" My fist hits his chest, barely enough to feel it. "Why didn't you just—"

"Because we couldn't! We didn't know what the fuck his trigger was. No one did but him!" His hand cups the back of my head, pressing my face into his neck. "Fuck, Ivy. I lived one million different deaths and I'd live two million more if it meant you no longer lived in the house *he built*."

He taps my head.

I chuckle, mimicking Emeric's tone. "There was a house that needed to be built, but first, it needed the foundation and the walls, strong enough to keep everyone and everything out. *Until it was time to play house*."

I shake my head. The rhyme was there the whole time and I never saw it. "He built my mind as a house and focused too much on the construction

of it while Nonna was filling it with love. Humanity. Friends, and family traditions...”

He kisses my cheek softly, just a brush of bloody lips.

“You need to let me fix your wound,” he whispers. “Are you gonna let me if I release you, or are you gonna try to kill me again?”

The warmth of his chest against mine makes it worse, the guilt settling in my bones.

I put a bullet in him. I—I

He looks down at his hand, at the mess between us. “If you wanted to dabble in some bloodplay, Venom.” The corner of his lip twitches into a smirk. “You could have just asked.”

I don’t laugh.

When he starts to lift his weight off me, I clamp my hand around the back of his neck and hold him there.

He goes still, his breath warm against my lips.

“Ash,” I whisper, my ribs compressing. “I can’t.”

“Ivy?” Luce whispers from behind me and I freeze.

Luce’s hazel eyes catch mine over Asher’s shoulder.

Her face crumples, and she takes one step toward me before stopping with both hands curled against her stomach.

“I’m here,” she says.

Asher turns his head enough to see her, and the movement brings his mouth against my temple.

My skin crawls.

His hands have held me through nightmares. They’ve cleaned blood from my body and tucked blankets around my feet. Those same hands kept Emeric’s name buried while I slept beside him.

I loosen my fingers from Asher’s neck.

“Ash, move.”

His gaze returns to mine.

“You’re bleeding.”

“So are you.”

“Ivy—”

“Get off me.”

His jaw locks. For one second, I see Le Parrain staring down at me. The man who can order executions between snowboard runs and smile at the camera for all his fans.

Then his grip opens.

Asher lifts himself from my body and keeps one hand over the wound in my side until Luce drops beside me. Blood coats his palm, bright against the lines of his skin.

I push onto my elbows.

The room sways, forcing me to close my eyes.

He is Le Parrain.

Emeric is my father.

Asher knew.

Each fact carries a hundred memories behind it. Every time he kissed me instead of answering a question. His face above mine in bed, blue eyes holding steady while I handed him pieces of myself he already understood better than I did.

A laugh scratches at my throat, then dies there.

It isn't a matter of if I love him. My body proved that before my mind caught up. It recognized him in every room, searched for him through every crowd, and ran toward him with the same instinct that reaches for a blade.

It's forgiveness.

Luce slips an arm behind my back and helps me sit. "I'm going to fix you up. You can hate me later."

Asher stays on his knees beside us.

His split lip starts bleeding again. I did that. The cut across his chest is mine too. Blood slips from his palm and drops to the floor between us.

I stare at him until his face blurs.

"Venom."

I pull my legs beneath me and lean into Luce.

He reaches for my cheek.

I turn my head.

His hand stops inches from my skin, fingers curling toward his palm.

Around us, everyone has gone silent. I don't even know who's all here. Camille exists somewhere, but I don't have the room left in my skull to care.

"I want to go home."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

IVY

VEILARATH STRETCHES ON FOREVER, and I spend every minute of the drive with my forehead pressed to freezing glass.

Nobody talks as Khloe drives. Everyone breaths carefully, like I'm a fragile ticking time bomb.

Asher's thigh brushes mine.

I refuse to look at him.

Every lesson Emeric drilled into me is connecting more and more, and I grip my knees as his design becomes clear.

I fucking hate that some part of me always knew. The maps never matched, and Désamour smelled of pine and cold stone instead of the French countryside.

"Ivy." Asher hasn't let anyone stitch him up yet. Whatever's lodged in his side is still in there, keeping his blood where it belongs. "Baby, say something."

My jaw locks.

"Anything. Scream at me. Call me a piece of shit. Put another bullet in me—I don't give a fuck. Just—"

"You're le parrain of the French Mob." I blink. "You're Le Boucher Sans Loi, a ruthless killer who chops people into pieces."

Silence fills the car.

"Not people. Fucking enemies, Ivy. And Le Boucher was a means to an end so that we can regain control of an organization that completely lost its way."

My eyes snap to him. “And who created him? Le Boucher?”

Asher stares right through me. “You did. You started it, my grandfather trained it, and I fucking *finished* it.”

I’ve got nothing else to give him but silence.

“I created a monster.” My throat swells.

“That *monster* is your fucking pet, Ivy, and you fucking know it.” He leans forward, wincing when the movement pulls at his wound. “I knew what would happen if I told you.”

“I don’t care what you knew.” I turn back to the window. “I care that you didn’t tell me.”

I wish he’d fight me. Push me further. Atleast then, I’d have something to sharpen my rage on. Instead he takes every word I throw at him.

Khloe guides the car up a long private road, and I freeze.

Désamour.

Stone walls rise around the courtyard, their cracks threaded with wilted ivy. The fountain sits at the center, sealed beneath a thick skin of ice, every carved figure caught mid-pour.

No warmth resides inside. Because Nonna is dead and never coming back, and without her this home is just a house.

The engine cuts.

Khloe shoves her door open first, and winter pours in, stinging my eyes. The others spill out after her, Punk, Atlas, Luce, and Leon, their boots crunching toward the house while I stare through the windshield.

Asher doesn’t move.

Neither do I.

“You coming in?” He asks, fully prepared and not caring about whatever I throw at him.

“No.”

A breath leaves him. “Ivy—”

“I’m coming in.” I shoulder the door open. “Just not with you.”

I slam the door before he can answer.

My body belongs to someone else as I move up the steps, feet raw inside the boots someone shoved on me before we left Dovecrest.

I pause halfway up.

Daniel stands on the patio with his hands buried in his coat pockets, snow settling across his shoulders. His brows are drawn tight, carved deep by everything he kept from me.

Emeric knew.

Nonna knew.

Leon, Luce, Punk—they all knew.

But Daniel?

Daniel was my driver, my bodyguard, the face I searched for in every room and on every job. One look at him, and my entire nervous system would relax. I had someone there—a confidant, a fucking friend.

I *trusted* him.

He opens his mouth.

I walk past him like he's a stranger.

"Ivy—"

I slam the front door closed, so caught up in Daniel's betrayal that I forget I'm walking back into Nonna's crime scene. My stomach caves in on itself and I squeeze my eyes shut, grabbing the stair rail before my legs give out.

Voices filter in from somewhere deep in the house.

I fucking trusted all of them.

"There was a house that needed to be built."

I scoff, eyes snapping open onto the familiar wallpaper.

Fuck that house. The foundation was cracked before I *ever* moved in, and the walls came with blueprints someone else drew. Security? Oh no. You don't get that either. Every lock in the place answered to someone else's key. *Right, Punk?*

They all knew.

Footsteps on the stairs behind me.

I don't turn.

"Ive, come, Luce is making hot chocolate," Leon murmurs, unease thick in his tone.

I keep my eyes locked on the wall. "I'm fine."

"You're not, and it's okay."

"I'm fine," I repeat. "Go back to whatever you were doing. Pretending. Scheming. Whatever."

He's quiet for a moment.

"You want to be angry at me," he says. "That's fair."

"I don't want to be angry." I pause. "I want to not have spent my entire life being a puppet for men."

Leon doesn't answer.

“Was any of it real?” I ask the question to the floor, letting our childhood memories run through me. “Not the training. I’m talking about the nights we stayed up because I couldn’t sleep and you made me tea and told me stories about the places you’d been. Was any of that real, or was it just—conditioning? Part of the script?”

“It was real,” he mutters. “Ivy, it was real. I swear to you—”

“Don’t.” I back up, legs steadier than I expect.

I rush up the stairs before he can answer, slamming my door closed when I’m inside.

When you don’t know who you are, ask yourself how you feel.

Nonna’s words float up from the wreckage, and I close my eyes.

How do I feel?

Like a marionette with half its strings cut, still dragging itself across a stage it never asked to stand on.

Now what? Now I’m supposed to be in this house and remember that the only woman who could help me out of this mess is dead.

Sniffing, I push off the door and head for the shower. No amount of scrubbing is going to remove how dirty I feel, but it’s a start. The water beats down on my shoulders while I stare at the spot Asher shoved me against the last time I was here.

Is he still here?

Probably. I can’t imagine him leaving me to wallow on my own.

I stand under the spray until the water runs cold, scrubbing blood from under my nails, from the creases of my palms, from the place behind my ears where Aléia’s blood splattered when I opened her throat.

The reaction of her death as soon as that memory landed is exactly why I’m classified a weapon. “*Give her more sedation. But not enough that she can’t feel what’s happening. Emeric?*” Aléia called over her shoulder, the light above burning through my retinas. “*Scalpel.*”

Bitch. Fucking bitch.

She was a fucking Monét. A *Monét*. A shit one at that. Does Camille know who true family line? No doubt she does.

I need to stop thinking about it. So I scrub, mechanical and thorough, until there’s nothing left but clean skin and the faint tremor in my hands.

Stepping out, I wrap a towel around my body, and throw on a pair of linen pants and a cardigan. I can’t even be bothered brushing my hair as I tie it in a wet knot on the top of my head.

Teeth. I need to brush my teeth.

I go through the motions, but everything reminds me of everyone.

Tightening the cardi around my waist, I shift the curtain aside and look down at the yard. Nonna's greenhouse sits opposite the shed. Whenever she'd have a quiet day, or she'd be battling with something none of us knew, it always seemed to help her. She'd say that nature had a way of providing us answers if we were listening hard enough.

I pull on socks and boots, listening at the door before slipping into the hall. Fresh cookies sweeten the air, making my stomach rumble. *Liars*. My appetite vanishes, as low voices drift from downstairs, broken by long stretches of silence.

"I want to see her," Jord muffles around his cookie.

My hand flies to my mouth to catch my laugh.

"Well, you can't. Not yet..." Leon sighs. "She will come when she's ready. You know what Ivy's like."

"She needs to know that I knew nothing."

I know.

"She already does, dipshit," Punk snaps, but there's a heavy sadness in her tone.

What little smile I had slips.

I head down the opposite way as if Nonna herself were directing me.

Snow swallows my boots. The yard stretches white and empty between the house and greenhouse, and I cross it with my arms pinned to my chest, breath fogging as the wind cuts straight through my cardigan.

I shoulder the door open, pausing when I reach inside. Dead. All of it. Rows of brown stems collapse over the edges of their pots. Leaves curl into brittle fists on the soil. Nonna's orchids hang off their stakes like wet tissue. It smells of frozen dirt and rot.

Moving slowly down the center aisle, I trail my fingers over a table of shriveled herbs. Basil, thyme, the mint she swore would survive a nuclear winter. The roots have gone black, my throat closing tighter with every step because this is what she left behind and we let it die.

At the end of the far bench, half-hidden behind a fallen trellis, ivory petals open to the gray light. Green veins mark their throats, the single stem standing straight in frozen soil, built for the cold. *Hellébore*.

My hand closes around the choker.

“The Hellébore has quite the rep in French folklore,” Asher murmured as he drapped the necklace around my throat. His fingers brushed against my skin. “It was believed to ward off evil spirits and protect against dark magic.” Metal settled against my collarbone as he worked the clasp. “Sounds suspicious.” I managed to breathe out with a chuckle. “It was also known as the ‘Winter Rose’ because it flourishes in cold temperatures, where other flowers wither and die.”

I pick up the pot. Soft petals brush my knuckles, alive against my skin. My chest caves in around a ragged breath as I hold the last living thing in this dead garden, tears sliding hot down my face.

“Huh, would you look at that?” Asher mumbles from the doorway, and every muscle in my back locks.

I set the pot on the bench, and wipe my cheeks with the heel of my hand before turning around.

Dressed in a black hoodie and sweats, I can smell the soap on him from here. God, does he have to be so beautiful? I feel like i’ve spent a large chunk of the time I’ve known him cursing the Gods for creating someone quite literally perfect, with *every* fucking red flag known to man.

He looks at the flower, then at me.

“I’ve been sitting here, trying to piece the puzzle back together now that I have all the parts.” I swallow. “Parker?”

One footstep. “Me. I ordered it in. Emeric called the hit on you all when he thought his plan of getting Amélie back so he could kill her wasn’t working. Next question.”

I scoff, touching a petal. “So much violence.”

Another step. “So little time.”

My eyes snap to him and he stops. “You stole my kill, but I’m not mad about that.” Kind of... I could get over it. “It’s the constant loop of lies. Did he die in pain?”

“He was awake the hole time. Until, well... the end.”

“Why?” I finally say, desperate for something to grasp onto. “Why?”

“For one, Venom, I’d been killing these motherfuckers since I first saw you hanging on that yacht—“Everything stops, but he keeps going. “—La Maison Du Mal wasn’t always like this. My father, Aléia, Emeric, they corrupted it the second they got the power they stole.”

I squeeze my fists. “So you ordered me to take Parker?”

“Yes.” His eyes widen. “I had to know you. More of you. Were you like him? Worse?” Pause. “Then I saw you for the first time at his apartment. Alderic and I were fighting because he hated that he’d lost what little power he had. Why the fuck do you think he sat there and took the relationship, took the marriage, took the bullet?”

He tilts his head. “Because he *knew* better. He knew who I was because I told him right after sending him Emeric’s head, and he knew *exactly* what the fuck was going to happen if he didn’t follow my instructions. Ivy—“

“Don’t.”

I keep my feet planted on the ground because if I take one step toward him, I’ll take all of them. I’ll crawl inside that hoodie and let him stitch me back together with the same hands that built the lie.

I can’t do that. I can’t do him, or Leon, or Daniel, or any of them standing in that kitchen eating Nonna’s recipes and calling it loyalty. I need distance. From him most of all, and from everyone else right behind him, until I figure out which parts of me are actually mine.

“Don’t what?” he argues. “Don’t come near you? Don’t look at you? Pick one, and I’ll rip it apart just to fucking feel you.”

Those words would terrify any other woman. Any *sane* woman.

My chin drops. “I’m leaving, Asher.”

He doesn’t blink. “No, you’re not.”

“I’m leaving.” I fold my arms, gripping my own elbows through the cardigan so my hands have somewhere to be. “And you’re going to let me go.”

“Mmm,” his eyes slide to the side before coming back to me. “Try again.”

“I’m not asking permission.” My throat aches around every word. “I’m telling you what’s happening.”

Even if it’s going to kill me to do it.

“You want space?” His eyes narrow, jaw flexing. “Fine. You can have the whole east wing of the house. Or shit, I’ll sleep in the car if it means you stay, but—“

I shake my head. “It’s not about space.”

“Then what—Ivy?” His voice cracks.

Every second I stand here watching him fall apart tears me open too.

“Say it. Say the actual thing, Ivy, because I’ve been walking myself in circles wondering what the fuck else he put in that head of yours. What

other memories you've been carrying that you didn't know about before."

"I—" The words scrape out. "I wanted to kill you, Asher."

Tears build behind my eyes.

"And I felt fucking *nothing*. Do you understand? I stood there and I wanted to be efficient. Because that's what he built, and it's still in me, and I'm fucking terrified that it will come back. That maybe Nonna's trigger is only going to work until the next one. How do I know he didn't put a thousand in my head, Asher!"

His expression remains blank. "I don't care."

"I know." A laugh slips from my chest and I swipe the tears off my cheek. "You *don't* care. You'd let me be that forever if it meant I stayed within arm's reach."

He goes still.

"You'd take any version of me," I whisper, looking into the eyes of a man so beautifully dark he tricked even me. "Programmed. Broken. Whatever scrap he left behind. I mean god, Ash! I don't even know who this girl is!"

"Then find her next to me."

"Asher—"

"I'll wait." His knuckles graze my cheek. "Fuck, Venom. I'll wait outside whatever door you slam in my face. I don't need you fixed because you'll always be fucking perfect to me. You're right to think I'd take any version of you, because I fucking would. A thousand times over I would—"

"You lied to me." The words leave me in a whisper. "Every single day since the second we met, you looked at me and you chose the lie. And I understand why. I do. But I can't unknow it, and I can't sleep next to it."

His hand drops to his side, and I can see the fight still working in him, the part that wants to force my hand.

"Don't do this." His fingers flex at his side, and the Hellébore tightens against my throat when I swallow. A winter rose for the woman he decided would survive anything.

Just not him.

My heel slides back across the damp floor. One step. That's all I can manage.

"It's too late. But you can do one thing for me before I leave."

His jaw tenses, reaching for my face before stopping.

"What?"

“You can give me the details of who killed Nonna. I’m guessing they came from Aléia, but I want the who.”

It takes everything inside of me to not fall apart.

“Please,” I whisper, eyes dry.

He sighs, shaking his head. “Fuck. Yeah, I’m definitely gonna have to let you go after this because you’re going to hate me.”

I freeze.

“I killed him already—” he pauses, most likely waiting for my response. Which wants to be murder but I’m trying to be a better person like fuck. “—It was another Family. Hidden in the guise of a priest and his daughter. The priest did the hit and I got him right after. His daughter is still there if you want something, but as far as I last checked, she’s out of the life...”

My mouth snaps closed, nails biting into my palms. I could. I could take this bitch out the same way Nonna was, but that would make me just like Emeric—lost in revenge. I can’t punish her for her father’s sins.

“You’re right,” I whisper, voice cracked. “You really are going to have to let me go.”

Stepping back, I leave the greenhouse and him inside it. I walk back into the house without bothering to scrape the tears off my face. No one will try to stop me from leaving. They’re smarter than that.

Am I pissed about him taking another kill from me? Yes. I have a feeling he’s done it on purpose, during a time of being careful to not trip the wires Emeric placed in my brain, but Aléia met my blade. Her daughter Camille won’t be so lucky. This one *can* be punished for her mother’s sins.

I wish I could tell Asher the rest of it. That Emeric made sure to steal one last thing from me as a back up. Something that would guarantee he’d never risk spending his life with me if he knew, because every family has to live on.

That much is absolute.

Antiseptic had a distinct smell. It coated the back of my tongue, taking over whatever they pushed into my vein.

A white light burns above me. The metal shade cuts the glare into a hard circle, bleaching the ceiling and the hands moving between my knees. My legs rest in padded stirrups, spread so wide my hips ache. Leather straps cross my ankles. Another pins my waist to the bed.

I try to lift my head.

The room rolls, and bile crawls into my throat.

Aléia stands beside a steel tray in a pale blue gown. Her hair is tucked beneath a cap, and a mask hangs loose below her chin. Blood freckles one glove. She watches the person seated at the foot of the bed, whose face blurs each time I blink.

The drugs smear everything into wet paint.

Parker. It's fucking Parker—

Emeric waits beside my shoulder in a black suit, untouched by the white tile and stainless steel. He checks his watch while an instrument scrapes deep inside me.

Pain rips through my pelvis.

My back arches against the restraint, and a cry tears out of my mouth. Parker catches my thigh before it slips from the stirrup.

"Hold her," Aléia says.

A hand clamps around my knee.

"What are you doing?" My tongue feels swollen. Each word drags across my teeth.

Emeric looks down at me.

I reach for him, but my wrist barely lifts from the mattress. A clear tube runs beneath the tape on my arm. The liquid inside it falls one drop at a time.

"Please." My fingers curl toward his sleeve. "It hurts."

Aléia places another bloodied instrument on the tray. Metal strikes metal, and my stomach clenches at the sound.

"She needs another dose," Parker says.

"She needs to remain conscious," Emeric answers.

A fresh bolt of pain splits through me. I buck against the leather until it bites my skin. Something inside my body pulls, then tears, and sweat runs into my ears.

Get up.

My legs twitch in their restraints.

Fight them.

My hands refuse to close.

Emeric leans over the bed and pats my hair, smoothing it back from my damp forehead.

"It's okay, you won't remember this for a long time." His thumb brushes my temple. "We can't have you creating more Monét's or god forbid les

*amants maudits takes shape and we have a new generation of Delacroix's.
Even if it costs me mine."*

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

IVY

SIX MONTHS LATER

“TRULY, why do we have to do this?” Jord grumbles, clipping his boots back on. “What happened to champagne and rugby?”

“You wanted rugby,” Luce answers, skidding to a stop beside him. “Ivy wanted this. I’ll remind you it’s her birthday, and we’re still fresh out of the doghouse with her, so none of us wants to rock the boat right now.”

“Speak for yourself!” Khloe hollers from the end of the line. “Ivy wasn’t mad at me!”

True, I wasn’t. It’s been six months since everything both fell apart and together. I was mad at my family for a long time, until I understood that they were victims of Emeric’s fuckery too.

I wish I could say forgiving *someone else* came that easy. It didn’t. Do I forgive him? Yes. Do I miss him? Yes.

God. So much...

But none of that changes the facts, and the fact is that La Maison du Mal needs to be continued, and if Asher stays with me, he’ll never be able to play his part in the family tree.

“Champagne and rugby *after* this!” I snap at Jord, unlocking my phone for a photo of the view. Beyond the thick white snow at our feet, the lights of Veilarath glitter in the dark. Far too pretty to miss.

I open Instagram and pause over a new post from Asher.

I've watched him from a distance while buying the house in Chicago and settling back into my foundation life. Publishing is a dog-eat-dog world, but there's some satisfaction in helping people chase their dreams. Especially when you've spent so much time running from nightmares.

My heart drops into a slow, heavy beat at his smile. God, he's fucking beautiful. Bastard. His face is harder, like all he's done is protein and weights, which doesn't surprise me.

The reporter asks him about his new prodigy and how the training has been going. It's the first I've heard of it, but I take it it has something to do with him retiring his board.

I need to stop staring and exit this app.

Mountain air fills my lungs in an inhale of ice and pine.

I read the caption three times before the letters stop swimming.

"Stop cheating, Khloe!" Jord shouts, jerking my head up.

Luce laughs behind him. "She's been taking lessons from Asher!"

Khloe's already halfway down the slope, her board spraying snow in a tail behind her. She'd counted down from three but launched at two, classic Khloe.

My thighs burn on the push off. The slope drops beneath me, leaving my stomach weightless for a second. Fresh powder peels away under my edge until all I hear is my heartbeat.

This is what I wanted for my birthday. My friends, the cold, and a sky throwing a color show above us.

My board cuts a clean line, and I'm smiling. Actually smiling. Wind roars in my ears as I lean harder into the slope, chasing speed. For once, he disappears from my head.

A hand clamps around my arm and the force spins me in a controlled circle. Expensive cologne fills my nose as we slide to a stop in a drift, my back hitting a solid wall.

"Happy birthday, Venom," he murmurs, so low only I can hear.

My lungs stop working until I feel dizzy, and I lean into his warmth. "Ah, I should have known Khloe wouldn't listen to my rules."

"Rules?" Asher slides around to the front of me, and holy fuck, six months did *nothing* to cool what he does to my body.

His head tilts. "Now you and I both know I don't follow any rules."

I sniff. "True."

"So I've come to this conclusion." His hand laces with mine.

“Oh, and what is that?”

The corner of his mouth tips up. “That I’m done giving you space.”

My chest aches. I picture him in my bed, his mouth on my skin each morning until I forget every nightmare that came before him.

I want him more than I want anything.

My smile slips. Cold sinks through my gloves as my fingers loosen around his.

The House needs heirs, and Asher still has no idea what Emeric took from me.

He deserves a choice.

“Asher...” I shake my head, but his grip tightens. “I can’t do this to you.”

“Do what?” His free hand finds the back of my neck, fingers sliding through my hair. Drawing me forward, his forehead touches mine.

My throat closes.

“You have a family line to continue. La Maison needs—and I...”

Have survived bullets, blades, captivity, and Emeric’s bullshit. Yet this... this I can’t even say.

I can’t have children.

“I know, Venom.”

I still.

“I know what he fucking did to you, and I wish I could bring him back alive so I could kill him all over again.”

He caresses the frantic pulse in my neck. “Maybe this time I’d leave his body parts in his piano instead of sending them to Parker and Aléia.”

For a moment, he goes distant, fingers flexing against my neck. Maybe he’s back in that room with Emeric, reliving each butchering moment.

“But I can’t.” His breath warms my frozen lips. “He’s dead, yet he still has you thinking you owe people shit.”

“Asher, your family...”

“Atlas and Punk can spit out some kids once they’re done pretending they hate each other.”

A broken laugh escapes me.

He cups my neck harder, keeping me against him.

“I need you.” His voice cracks, grip tensing. “I swear to fucking God, Ivy, I need you. I love you. I don’t care about heirs, bloodlines, the codex,

or any of that shit. They can carve my name off every wall on this island. They can burn La Maison to the fucking ground.”

My eyes sting until hot tears spill over my cheeks. “Asher…”

“I choose you.”

“I’m—I’d never ask you to!” I fist both hands in his jacket.

Fuck it. I kiss him.

He steps us back as his tongue slips between my lips.

Home. He’s home.

His hands land on my ass, dragging me over the thick line of his cock and suddenly he’s not close enough. Not fucking inside me.

With every deep thrust of his tongue, my hunger grows, until a primal sound escapes between us. Teeth catch my lower lip before he licks the sting away.

Air brushes my stomach as his fingers shove past the waistband of my pants, cupping my bare pussy.

“Soaked,” he growls against my mouth. “Been waiting for me?”

My answer is my thumbnail catching on his zipper, yanking it down, shoving denim and thermal aside until hot silk meets my palm.

Bark catches my sweater, snow crunching under his boots as he lifts me. Fingers dig into my thighs hard enough to bruise, then I’m airborne for half a second before he drops me over his cock.

I choke on a scream, half pain and half desperate relief, as he fills me too fast, too deep, stretching me with every thick inch.

“Fucking perfect,” he growls against my neck. “Always so wet for me, Venom. Because your body knows it’s mine.”

His hips snap forward, driving me harder against the tree. The impact rattles through my skull, stars bursting behind my eyes. I claw at his shoulders as he drives into me without slowing.

Grinding deep, he pauses at the hilt.

God, it’s almost too much.

“Ash,” I breathe, the word dissolving into a moan as he grinds his pelvis against mine, that slow pressure sending liquid heat right through my pussy.

He pulls out slowly, dragging every ridge and vein against me before slamming back in.

So thick—so fucking thick I’m going to split open.

“Yeah,” he smirks against my throat. “This is yours. Don’t ever fucking second guess this shit again.”

He fucks me fast and dirty, each thrust driving me higher up the tree until my fingers sink into his shoulders.

"So tight," he grits out, forehead pressing to mine. "Been thinking about this for six months."

I can't form words. Each stroke takes the air out of me and leaves a broken sound that sounds awfully similar to his name.

He works hard circles over my clit in rhythm with his thrusts until my thighs shake.

I drag my nails down his back, riding his aggression and chasing every god-damned thing he's feeding me.

"Come—" his breath catches, dropping to a lazy groan. "Fuck. Come on my cock, baby."

Holy shit—my pussy grips him for a single moment, before every organ in my body explodes in a rush.

His thrusts become heavy, each one hitting hard. "Yours."

I'm still trembling through my first orgasm when he buries his face in my neck. Every growl, moan, fucking pant, all turn nuclear when his release rips a second one out of me with a muffled scream.

We stay exactly like this, forehead resting against my temple until our breathing slows.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, before kissing the choker. "Always mine."

"Yes." I lift my palm to his cheek. "Always yours."

His eyes close, every muscle in his shoulder loosening as he shifts his weight while still buried inside me.

I tense.

He swipes my lip with his thumb. "We should get you inside before you freeze to death."

"Whose fault is that?" I side-eye him, pulling down my shirt.

"Yours." He kisses my nose. "For leaving."

That shuts me up.

Asher grins. "Race you to the bottom."

"What? So you can let me win again?" I say, brow arched.

"I never *let* you win." He kisses me again once we're decent, pulling me under his arm. "I just prefer the view from back here."

I shove him playfully as I slip forward.

Wind tears at my ears as the mountain streaks past, and I let the board fly. Asher rides close behind, his board hissing through the snow at my back. Driving my edge in, ice sprays out as I skid to a stop when we hit the bottom entrance to the manor.

Every good feeling disappears when I see who's standing beneath the canopy near the pool, the fire painting her silhouette in amber.

My mother.

Asher pulls up beside me and gets a boot free, his hand already on my hip. His squeeze is possessive as his mouth skims the top of my head.

"Hear her out."

"I don't want to."

"I know." His thumb traces a slow circle over my jacket. "Do it anyway."

I stare at her across the pillow of snow. She hasn't moved. It wasn't her fault. I know that. I've known it for months, ever since the truth clawed its way out of Emeric's grave. She didn't abandon me. She didn't *choose* any of it. But knowing that doesn't fill the hollowed space of her overall absence.

"Ivy." Asher's voice drops, that low register he uses when he's giving me orders in bed. "Venom. Look at me."

I look.

Firelight flickers across his eyes, bleaching them almost colorless. "Give her five minutes. If she wastes them, I'll drag her back to Désamour myself."

He kisses me again, slower this time.

I pull my beanie off and shake out my hair. Amélie watches me cross the snow, and up close, our shared genetics become more and more obvious.

"Ivy," she says, exposing her slight accent.

"You waited outside in the snow. That's either dedication or stupidity."

The corner of her mouth lifts. "Well, I'm going to go with a bit of both."

"Sit," I tell her, lowering myself into the chair across from her. "Since apparently I'm in a forgiving mood."

She claims a single sofa, lowering the hood and crossing her legs. "I'm sorry that I..."

"Why didn't you come for me earlier?" The cut-off is rude and pretty shitty of me, but if I don't like her answer to this, then I'm not going to

want to listen to whatever else she has to say.

"We only—"she pauses, recollecting her words. "I only found out about you when Nonna was on the yacht, there to kill Emeric herself. She saw you and it changed her plans. She needed to get you out, but we knew we had to be smart. Better than smart, since Emeric was smarter than everyone, unfortunately."

Silence.

I guess it makes sense, in a way that none of this should.

"I'm sorry, Ivanya, I do hope that one day you can forgive me. But there is something that I do come to you with."

That's rich, but I let her speak because Asher.

She clears her throat, pulling a clear folder from her coat. "You can deny this offer or take it. It is up to you."

I flip open the pages. The folder holds file after file of names, drawings, and codex outlines.

"What is this?" My fingers tighten around the folder.

She chews on her lip. "That is the Dubois Maison. I understand that you would want nothing to do with it, but there is a whole family line that still needs a leader, and since you are the next, it's only right it goes to you first."

Heat crawls up my neck.

I drag in a breath and let it out slowly.

Emeric, *is* my father, and if what Asher was saying about Emeric, Parker, and Aléia being the rot is true, that means there are a lot that are innocent.

I could make a change.

"I'd be training them my way," I say, flipping through the details.

Pages of methods I recognize. Techniques Emeric used. I'd burn half of them before I let them touch another person, but a lot of them I can work with. Switch around and build better ones. They'll study every technique, saving the hands-on work for the field.

Unless we find some test dummies that truly deserve it...

I stop flipping, looking up at her. "As in they'll be hunting the very things I did, until another House needs our help."

Amélie doesn't answer right away.

Her fingers knot in her lap, one hand trapping the other before she can reach for me. "I guess being married to Le Parrain, you can do whatever

you wish.”

A small smile pulls at her mouth.

Could that be pride?

“And I have to say, I’m glad.”

The folder snaps shut in my hands. I’ll do whatever I can to keep another Emeric from running this world.

I cross to the small bar fridge, pull out a couple of beers, and hand her one before sitting back down.

“Another question,” I say, taking a swig. “Tell me about les amants maudits.”

Amélie laughs, her head tipping back as her voice rises over the crackle of the fire.

“Well,” she murmurs, and her eyes find mine as she takes a slow pull of her beer. “Judging by the history between you and your lover, I’m going to go ahead and say that there’s no explanation necessary.”

I snort into my beer. “Ah, we’ve almost killed each other. Multiple times.”

She tips her bottle at me, mouth curved. “Exactly, *the cursed lovers*.”

I thought I could ignore the translation a little longer.

888 Veilarath Lane glows in the dark, pulling a smile onto my lips. Bodies move through gold light and steam-fogged glass. Khloe crosses the kitchen with two plates in her hands. Jord cuts behind her and says something that makes her turn and shove him with her elbow.

My chest squeezes.

“Come inside,” I say, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “Have dinner with us.”

She looks past me and to the manor, then back. “I can’t. I need to head back to Désamour.”

Fine by me. I’ve already burned through tonight’s generosity. This relationship needs a slow build.

I set my beer on the table and pull my phone from my coat pocket. “I can have Daniel take you.”

She chuckles. “I have my own Daniel.”

“Well then,” I add, rising. “Get back to Désamour in one piece. I’d hate to finally meet my mother just to lose her in transit.”

She stands with me, folding one hand over the other. “I will do my best, Ivanya.”

I dip my chin once, unwilling to push my luck any further tonight. Between Asher on the mountain and trading beers with my mother over cursed lovers and inherited mob families, I've hit capacity.

Crossing the rest of the way, I slide the door open and pause for a moment.

Warmth settles around me as I take in the new construction of my house.

Jord is bent over the back of a chair, laughing so hard his face is red as Luce glares at him with a butter knife pointed. Punk glares at the figure near the front door. I already know who it is; Asher rarely comes without his twin. Khloe leans against the island with a glass of wine, grinning, probably the source of whatever disaster is unfolding between Jord and Luce.

And then Asher lifts his head from the far end of the table, finding me instantly.

Nonna brought this warmth to every house, every holiday. She may be gone, but she's alive wherever we exist. I know that now and I'll know it forever.

It took me a while to see it, but it's clear now. Emeric's death was never going to be as simple as a bullet. It was never about how bloody the butcher's slaughterhouse was when he took his last breath.

Emeric's death was always about irrelevance. He spent his life trying to become immortal through his creation, and in the end, he's less than a ghost, less than a blood stain.

He simply doesn't exist. He's a discarded script, a line of code that got overwritten, and a father to *no one*.

Emeric may have conditioned us to follow his command, but it's Nonna's love that always guided us home.

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EPILOGUE

ASHER

TWO YEARS LATER

ALL THE HOPE in the world couldn't have her keeping to her word. I mean, shit, I'm not mad. Sitting here watching as she goes through maneuvers with the students is somewhat healing.

She's fucking great at it. More than great.

"It's kind of terrifying how good she is."

Sinead leans against the railing of the patio with the expression of someone who has already placed three bets on how many bones Ivy breaks before lunch.

Below us, a dozen young Dubois stand in two rows across the frost-bitten lawn. They range from fourteen to eighteen. Every one of them wears black training clothes and the rigid posture the old house carved into its children. Ivy has spent two years teaching them how to loosen their shoulders, breathe through panic, and keep their hands from becoming weapons every time someone raises their voice.

It's going well.

One boy drops his gaze when Ivy approaches. She hooks two fingers beneath his chin and lifts his face toward hers.

"Look at me when you're afraid."

His throat works. "Yes, ma'am."

"Again."

"I look at you when I'm afraid."

“Good. Fear gives you information. It doesn’t get to make your decisions.”

She moves between them, barefoot in the thin grass, her long dark hair braided over one shoulder. Sunlight falls across her skin, bringing out the green in her eyes. She wears a black tank top and tight black pants tucked into combat boots, with her sheath clipped around her thigh.

She points toward the stone table in the center of the courtyard.

“Book One.”

The children answer together.

“Psychological Warfare.”

“Book Two.”

“Corps de Violence.”

“Book Three.”

“Advanced Manipulation.”

“Book Four.”

“Emergency Protocols for Emotional Contamination.”

Ivy nods once.

“Regulation comes before every book. If you lose control of your body, someone else gets to use it. If you lose control of your thoughts, they don’t even need to touch you.”

The kids barely blink.

Sinead glances at me. “Terrifying.”

I shrug. “Foreplay.”

Ivy turns toward the greenhouse she’s brought back to life, and Camille shuffles out of the shade at the end of a leash.

At the sight of the leash, I push off the pillar and head down the steps, stopping at the bottom when Ivy fists Camille’s hair.

Camille’s eyes find mine but no one is home. The shadows from the greenhouse harden her features, and her hair is about two years overdue for a cut. This is Ivy’s first time bringing her aboveground.

“Everyone say hi, Camille!” Ivy sing-songs.

The students stare. They all know who Camille is because she tutored them under Aléia, Emeric, and Alderic.

Ivy’s grip tightens, and Camille’s head jerks back, her throat exposed. My pulse stays even, unbothered.

“Camille was a puppet in the game, sure, but she is less than innocent.”

Camille keeps her eyes on me. I hold her gaze until Ivy jerks her head forward by the hair, forcing her attention back where it belongs. Possessive monster that she is.

Ivy's green eyes slide off me and land on her. "You don't get to look at him."

I lean back against the pillar at the foot of the steps, hiding my chuckle behind my hand.

Ivy takes Camille's right hand and turns it palm up, her fingers finding the ulnar side of the wrist.

"Between tendon and bone," Ivy says, clipping each word. "Control the pressure, angle, and timing."

Her thumb sinks into the nerve, and she pops the wrist a fraction, demonstrating the break in structure. Camille sucks air through her teeth, her whole body locking under Ivy's grip on her hair.

The students lean in, their faces shifting from fear to focus.

Ivy jerks the wrist again, showing another angle of attack, and Camille's knees buckle. Ivy keeps her upright by the hair and twisted wrist, staying loose and balanced while she explains the follow-through in a level voice.

My cock strains against my zipper because my girl is fucking beautiful. I adjust myself in full view, and I don't give a fuck who notices. They've watched me do worse.

Ivy's green eyes flick to mine for half a second, the corner of her mouth lifting.

"Again," she tells the students, and releases Camille's wrist just long enough to reset the demonstration.

The freckled blonde in the second row raises her hand, her stance perfect and her face blank. When she speaks, her voice stays steady enough to creep me the fuck out. She's gonna be a weapon.

"Mama V, could you demonstrate on him too?" She tips her chin toward me.

Every student turns toward me.

Motherfucker. She sure did learn from the best.

I should decline. I've got a brand deal meeting in three hours, a video conference with the Monét council in five, and a body that's still healing from her fucking me to sleep every day of the week.

The blonde's mouth curves slightly. Every student waits for my answer. They want to see us both in action.

Ivy's smirk widens, and my lip twitches.

Sinead comes down the steps and stops beside me. "I'll stock up on Band-Aids."

"Shut the fuck up."

I bite back a grin. Sinead laughs as they disappear through the archway.

Cracking my neck, I head toward the center of the formation. Crushed stone gives way to padded training surface beneath my boots.

Ivy releases Camille's wrist and squats in front of her, letting the leash fall slack between them. She keeps her back straight and her weight on the balls of her feet, lowering her voice.

"Do you understand why you're here?"

Camille's throat bobs. "Yes."

Ivy pats her cheek. "Good pet."

I grab my shirt by the back of the collar and pull it over my head in one motion, letting it fall onto the stone border around the mats. The mountain air hits my bare chest, cool against the heat under my skin.

Ivy's eyes move over me before she stands and turns to face me. She rolls her shoulders and drops into a ready stance.

"Well, come on then, *Ice Butcher*." She flashes a grin. "Let's play."

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Graphic violence

- Blood and injury detail
- Murder and attempted murder
- Kidnapping / captivity
- Restraint / confinement
- Forced marriage / coercive marriage setup
- Sexual coercion / dub-con power dynamics
- Explicit sexual content
- Obsessive and possessive relationship behavior
- Stalking / surveillance
- Emotional abuse
- Blackmail
- Psychological manipulation
- Gaslighting
- Brainwashing / conditioning
- Memory tampering / false memory implantation
- Torture / interrogation
- Trauma responses
- Toxic family dynamics
- Death of loved ones / grief

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