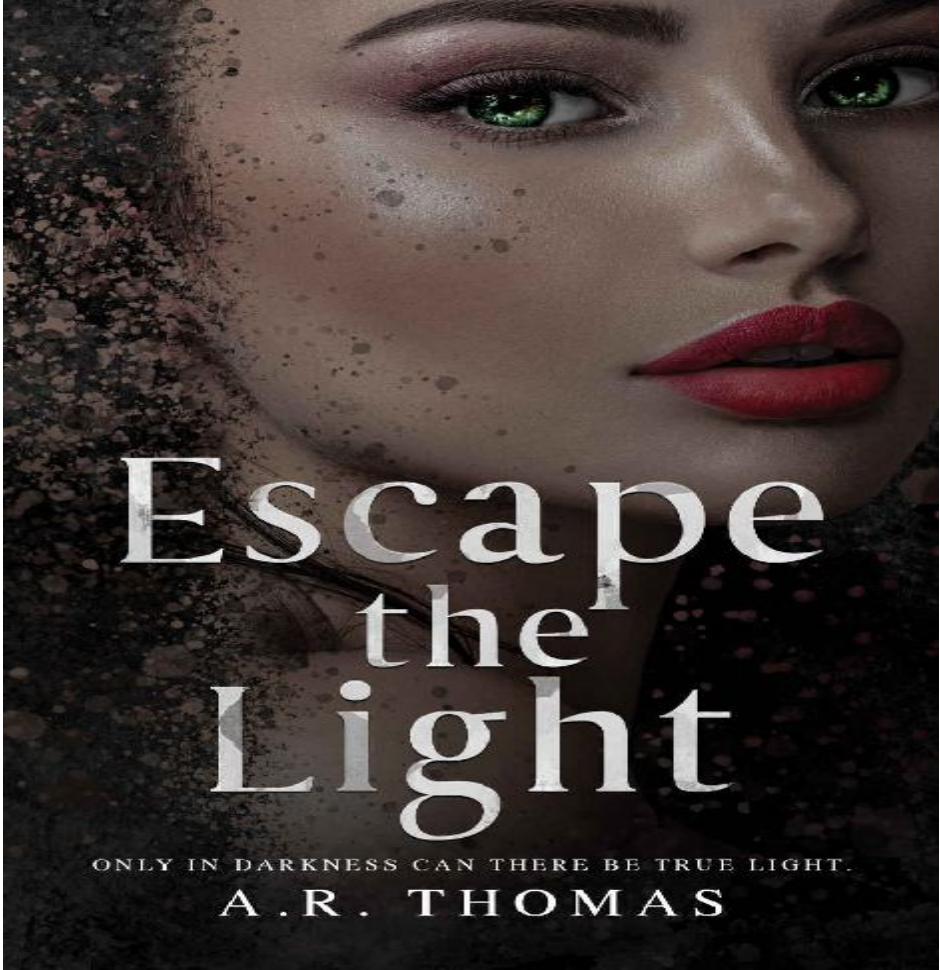


Escape the Light

ONLY IN DARKNESS CAN THERE BE TRUE LIGHT.

A . R . THOMAS



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Dedication

To all the readers whose souls speak
the same language as mine.

Playlist

“Let Me Down” – Jorga Smith, Stormzy

“Saved My Life” – Sia

“Lose My Breath” – Rhea Robertson

“Spies” – Coldplay

“Bruises” – Lewis Capaldi

“Fantasy” – Black Atlass

“Bad Karma” – Rivrs

“When The Party’s Over” – Billie Eilish

“Body” – Sinead Hartnett

“The One” Jorga Smith

“Stronger” – The Score

“Daydream” – Ruelle

“Himalaya” – Goldcheaper

“Stone Cold” – Demi Lovato

“Castle” – Halsey

“Something About You” – Rivrs

“Unsteady” – X Ambassadors

“Breathe” – Camelphat

“Want To” – Dua Lipa

“Play Dead” – Tom Walker

“Ballade” - Bakermat

Prologue

One year ago...

“What do you mean you want out?” Oscar, my closest and most trustworthy friend, gapes at me. He snaps up from where he was sprawled on the ottoman in my tiny walk-in, his face a picture of shock. “But you’re killing it. You’re on your A-game!” he exclaims, shaking his dark curls out of his face as I eye him through the mirror. My hand finds my necklace, and I roll the pendant between my fingers. A small wave of calm settles over me—it always does. It’s the only thing connecting me to my old life, and I cherish it.

I shrug, leaning past him to pull a dress down. “I never wanted this,” I remind him, stepping into my dress. Oscar zips me up, chewing his lip.

“I know, but you’re so good at it.” He drops back down on the ottoman and watches me move around, choosing shoes and earrings. “Why now? What’s changed?” he whines. We met early into my modelling career. I was stumbling around blindly, and we clicked. After bumping into each other at various functions that my new agent had encouraged me to attend, we became solid friends. He has been my only friend, really, making the transition smooth, easy, and less stressful.

I keep my back to him and filter through my jewellery, looking for something cute but casual to compliment my outfit, something that will go with my necklace. “Everything and nothing,” I reply softly. I give him a half-smile when I catch him looking quizzically at me. He may be my friend, but neither he, nor anyone else, will ever be my confidant. I could never tell them about my past.

Small arms wrap around my waist. “But we’re getting so much free stuff,” Oscar pouts, and I grin. I peck his cheek and take the perfume bottle he holds out for me.

“Thanks.” I’m ready to slip off into the night, become faceless and nondescript again. If I wait any longer, I will be too recognisable, too sought after. I never expected it to go this far. Scrap that. I’ve unwillingly rocketed into fame and made myself a prime target. Small modelling gigs enabled me to rent this little apartment, to put food on the table, to feel a small bloom of achievement, but now I’ve gone from being a plain face at the back of a catalogue to being on the front of tabloids and on the catwalk.

“What about money?” He picks up a handful of garments I’m yet to place back. “What about all this?” He lifts the discarded garments and looks longingly around my very crammed and dinky dressing room. It’s absolutely nothing like the grandeur of his home or his parents’ home. After visiting Oscar’s family estate, it very quickly became obvious he comes from old money and lives a very different life to me, and I sometimes wonder why he is friends with me.

“This is just stuff, Oscar.” I lift my head and look around the walk-in wardrobe before I look back at him. “I don’t need or want all of this,” I tell him slowly, but he adores all the flare and drama of my rocketing career.

I don’t. I don’t want any of it. I want a simple life, to be a simple woman and live a million miles away, carefree and not dictated by fear. Modelling was never on my radar. Being in the public eye means I’m on *their* radar. My only saving grace is I’m on *everyone’s* radar. They can’t get me when everyone is watching, I tell myself, as fear morphs into a physical being and walks around beside me. This job was only supposed to be a small money fix to keep me off the streets and give me some form of stability. Maybe this is exactly what I need. To be so noticed that I’m untouchable. The shadows never felt safe, so maybe the light is what I need to protect myself. Maybe fame is my only form of freedom.

The way to survive them.

Chapter One

Present Day...

Large, olive-green eyes stare back at me. Thick dark lashes and cheekbones higher than the ceiling draw attention to the undeniable beauty reflected back at me in the mirror, but my full cherry-red mouth quickly pulls it away. Or so I'm told, courtesy of Vogue. I stare and stare, trying to see what it is everyone raves about, trying to find some sort of pride in what this face has allowed me to achieve. I don't. I can't.

My mouth turns down, and I stare harder. My jaw ticks as I think of what is at risk because of this face. I turn, gaining a sharper view and frown once more, disliking what I see, who I see. Nothing. I see nothing, and I feel nothing. If I weren't such a puppet, I'd possibly feel hatred, but the face I'm looking back at, although it is familiar, does not feel like mine. I'm merely a viewing participant watching from the sidelines as my life is picked and pecked at by so many people: my face, my hair, my clothes and my time, all at the disposal of so many others.

I'm a cheat, a complete fraud. So many women would give their right arm, their soul even, for a mere chance to enjoy my job. They would have worked a damn sight harder than I ever had to, and here I sit, despising the direction of my life. I don't falter in my gaze. I've looked back at myself so many times in mirrors, lenses, magazines that I almost believe my face belongs to another. How did my face reach so far, amass such attention and fortune?

A face. That's all it is: skin and bone. I want to hate that face, but the sad green eyes are the only thing I have left to remind me of why I'm lucky enough to be here today. Green eyes like his: my father.

My eyes shutter, and I push away with a sigh, leaving my dresser. This life I have paved for myself is a gift, as much as it is a curse. Being in the limelight has given me a security I could never take for granted, so I won't.

Being so high profile means I'm constantly being monitored, followed, dissected by the world, and in turn, it has made me so inaccessible that I know I'm safe from *them*. My breath leaves me on a quick exhale, and I close my mind down to those thoughts. I can't live in fear. I refuse to. I want to laugh because not a day goes by when I don't think of them.

I quickly spritz myself with a sample of my own perfume—what better way to sell my product than to wear it myself? I glance back in the mirror, seeing a sleek, elegant woman. My straight black hair hits my slender shoulders and curtains my shuttered face, but below the surface, there is still a little girl lost and alone, and I hate that about myself. I move quickly away from the mirror, away from my thoughts. I just know Georgie will love this fragrance. I check the time and grab my things, heading out for my meeting.

~

“Here she is, my favourite model!” Georgie Blare stands from the table at Cobo. He's known in the advertising industry for his diverse vision and is an associate of mine. He chose the location for our breakfast meeting, and I didn't argue because it's close to Oscar's, and they do an egg white omelette I like. I lean in for a hug out of politeness, but it feels stiff to even me.

“How are you, Georgie?” I ask. He's a burly man and fills out a three-piece suit well. His greying hair compliments his false tan and light blue eyes.

“Superb, you smell divine,” he replies as we take our seats. “Is that it?” He's referring to my perfume. I nod with a smile. “I can really pick out the jasmine. It's light, but the undertones are very decadent. It's definitely a nighttime fragrance.”

I agree with him. It's heavy but fresh. Seductive. I'm really pleased with it, and messing around with the different scents has kept me busy and my mind occupied. With every project that ends, every job I complete, I desperately search for a new vice; another way to keep me busy, keep moving.

“Thought I would sample it for you—let us get a whiff in the cold light of day.” I quip my brow and smirk when he gives a low laugh.

Georgie and I get stuck in looking through marketing ideas and possible male models for me to shoot with; his idea, not mine. We're planning to

film in Paris, but I argue that London is my home and where the perfume originated from.

“I want to keep everything true to who I am.” God, that sounds ridiculous out loud—I have no idea who I am.

I hold his keen stare before picking up my tea and taking a sip. I can see he wants to argue, but when I lift my brow and check my watch, feigning boredom, I know he will cave. Georgie begged me to give him this opportunity. I’ve worked with him before, and he knows as well as I do, my name will make his shine. It’s an ugly truth.

“No male model, it mocks my image. Maybe we should shoot with other women and make it about female empowerment. Women can be seductive without having to prove themselves to a man, yes?” I say to myself, seeing the video play out in my mind. I’m renowned for being unobtainable, and I don’t want to lose that flare. It works now, so it will work with my fragrance. I say as much to him.

“You’re a hardball, Zara. When are you going to settle? Put these men out of their misery?” Georgie shakes his head with a grin. “Surely there is one man out there who has caught your attention?”

“I’m just having fun,” I comment. That’s what the press believes so naturally, what everyone else believes, so no point single-handedly denying it when the world is against you. He pecks my cheek, standing, and in answer to his question, my head screams no! No one has ever caught my attention or turned my head. I seem to be unaffected by the male race—maybe because I know just how cruel and inhumane they can be.

I force a blank expression on my face when he pulls back.

“I look forward to seeing you next month. I’ll send across some possible tracks, and Margie will pull something together, alluring, seductive.” His eyes twinkle.

“I trust her. Scout more models and make sure we’re all as different as possible,” I tell him. He nods and collects up his bag, stuffing some papers inside.

“Take care, Zara.”

I smile accommodatingly and allow him to settle the bill, thanking every god known to man that I’m alone. I stay behind and finish my tea, taking my time and enjoying watching the morning rush hurtle past me as I stay in the calm confines of the restaurant. For a moment, I allow myself the luxury to think I’m one of them. Just a regular person bogged down by the stress of

work and home life, rushing to meet a client, panicking about some meeting or how I'm going to pay a bill. Hell, at this point, I'd welcome an argument with a disorderly husband over the fraudulent life I'm living, wondering, waiting to see if this is finally going to be it for me. If *they* will finally come.

~

I told Oscar I would meet him mid-morning for a quick shop before I meet with my agent this afternoon.

It's a little while before I decide to leave the sanctuary of Cobo. I take an Uber to Oscar, who is leaning casually against the wall outside a small boutique I frequent. His face lights up as I pull up, and he gives me a discreet nod over the top of the car, so I know we have company. I plaster a smile on my face as I step free. He meets me on the curb and pecks my cheek—*his* kiss I welcome.

"I never understood why they are called paparazzi, but I get it now," he declares, threading his arm through mine.

"Oh really?" I feign interest, but my lips twitch.

"Well, it sounds like rats, doesn't it? Razzi? And they are like rats, slinking in the dark, stealing scraps, snivelling, weaselly things." His face twists, but mine breaks into a wide smile, and my laugh is throaty. "I already had a poke around and asked Charlene to put some things aside for you," he tells me as we step in.

"Thanks, you're too good to me." I peck his cheek, and Charlene welcomes me with a broad smile.

"Miss Reid. It's lovely to see you." Her hands are pressed together at her front, and her suit is an ensemble of coral and cream. It's the polar opposite of my dark wet-look trousers and silk camisole peeking out beneath my dark blazer.

I throw her a smile.

"You too. Holiday good?" I ask, knowing she recently went to Mexico.

"Stunning, thank you. I've put some items in your usual cubicle." She motions to the back, and I smile. "Can I get you a drink? Bollinger, maybe?" She looks at Oscar, as she knows I don't drink.

"Always." My friend grins and pulls at a silk champagne open back dress, and my eyes light up. "Divine." He smiles broadly, holding it up at my front. "Z, this will look flawless."

“Water, Zara?” Charlene asks.

“Please, can we add this to the selection?” I say as Oscar holds it out to her, and she replaces it with a fizzing flute.

“Bottoms up,” he drawls. The dress is added to the growing pile of garments, and over the next hour, I catwalk for Oscar, who helps me decide which to keep. His flute has long since been forgotten, and he is fluffing my hair whilst I model the champagne dress.

“If you did that loose curl, the bed-hair look with this dress would look the absolute shit,” he grins over my shoulder, “you could pair it with those studded open toe boots, give it an edge.”

“Remind me why you aren’t a personal shopper.”

“I have a job,” he pouts, his eyes full of playful delight.

“No, you don’t,” I laugh.

“I’m a stay-at-home son. Besides, mother dearest would be lost without me.” He gives my hair one more plump and sighs happily with his work. Oscar’s mother is living off her dead husband’s fortune whilst she drinks herself into oblivion.

“Aren’t you worried she will just spend all the money until she is broke?” I say. It’s something I have worried about for a while now.

“God no, she is still slowly ploughing her way through the interest. Honestly, there is rich, then there is Anita Winters,” he scoffs. “Keep this. You look like a virgin on the prowl,” he sniggers. I tut and slip out of it, holding it out for him to give to Charlene.

“Plans this afternoon?” I ask, pulling the curtain over so I can get dressed.

“I’ll prob hit the bars later.”

“Thirsty Thursday,” I muse.

“Naturally. I’ll take these up front.”

“Thanks.” I redress and stare at myself in the mirror. As beautiful as all the dresses are, I find this whole thing tedious. Oscar loves it, and I love him, so indulging him keeps me smiling, but I would give anything to be on the other side of the world, in a simple pair of shorts and a t-shirt, makeup-free, carefree, just bloody free. I shake my head, rebuking myself for wanting something I know I will never have, not now that I’m as sought out as I am, certainly not after *them*. I could never leave this lifestyle now—it’s possibly the only thing keeping me alive. I shudder and push free from the cubicle. The boutique is still as quiet as when I arrived, and I wonder

sometimes if I keep Charlene in business, as there is hardly anyone here when I visit.

Oscar is leaning over the counter chatting away to Charlene about fall season lines, and I roll my eyes. I really don't understand why he doesn't chase his passion for fashion.

"Oh, come on, get some gents wear in. I'll model it for you. I'll look fucking hot." He grins, and Charlene laughs softly.

"I don't doubt it," she replies. Her attention moves to me, and the items are all bagged up artfully. I use my credit card to pay whilst Oscar scoops up the various bags.

"Thanks." I smile. Oscar takes my arm, and we head out.

"Bye now." Charlene is the perfect hostess, demure, polite, and amenable. Oscar waves at her through the expertly decorated window as we make our way down the street.

"Ugh god, rats are still here."

"I didn't expect anything less," I huff. "I'll order an Uber," I suggest, heading round to a small artisan café to wait out the paparazzi. I check the time and mention that I need to drop my bags home and meet my agent.

"Sure thing, let's get drinks tomorrow night."

"Okay, I have that shoot, though," I remind him.

"I know. I have it on my calendar. I'll pick you up."

Chapter Two

The view before me is vast and dense. Buildings upon buildings run as far as the eye can see; a maze of brick, glass, and people, a fog of human congestion. I focus my attention on St Paul's Cathedral, appreciating its grandeur and history. In all the time I've lived in London, I've never been inside. I hope to rectify that at some point.

"Zara, lift your chin half an inch." I do as instructed, even though my neck is pulling painfully, and the unnatural twist of my waist is putting my usual flexibility to shame. "Perfect." The shutter of a camera clicks repeatedly. It doesn't feel perfect. It feels like torture. I stand in this position for what feels like hours, calmly breathing through my nose to dispel the mild pain. Finally, I'm asked to sit provocatively on the sleek wooden carving. It's the thickest tree trunk I've ever seen. The bark stripped away, and the wood smoothed down to silk so you could slide off it. I'm balanced strategically, my heels keeping me in position as my hands are placed to keep my dignity intact. The tiny black dress I'm wearing takes the pressure, and Martha, a makeup artist, quickly reapplies my postbox-red lipstick. I close my eyes, and when I open them, I stare head-on at the camera, conveying my most sultry look.

After multiple positions on the log that I'm no longer a fan of, Isaac, the photographer, calls it a day. I swing myself up and off when Oscar lifts his phone and snaps a candid on his phone of me. I give him a pointed look.

"For your Instagram," he tells me, winding in between the shoot gear to get to me and lifting his phone to show me. It's a good image. But it's exactly that: an image. I'm playing a part.

"You mean your Instagram. How is my fake account doing, anyway?" I eye him with a bemused smile.

Laughing lightly, he drops his head and, swiping his thumb over the screen, he lifts it to show me again.

"Twelve million, aren't you popular," he muses. I'm shocked, but I don't show it. So much for being faceless. My smile turns brittle as those

numbers swirl around my mind.

“Let me change, and we can get going,” I say lightly. My desire to cut myself off from this world and start anew is slipping through my fingers, day by day, shoot by shoot. As much as I know it’s not a possibility, I still torture myself with a false hope of escape.

“Oh, I spoke to Donnie. He said to keep the dress,” Oscar murmurs, snapping another image of the set as we move about.

“He did?” I try to find Donnie over the organised chaos happening around me, but he is nowhere to be seen.

“Face it, Zara, he’d be stupid if he didn’t. You slay in that, and when I upload this and other images of you in it, his line will take off.” Oscar leans to grab my coat, and I put it on as he leans against the wall, tapping away frantically on his screen. His thick and curly hair falls past his face and covers his expression, which I know will be pouty with concentration. Oscar’s misplaced confidence in me always makes me feel less authentic. Plus, Donnie and Isaac are big names in the fashion game, so they don’t need me.

“I’m beat. Let’s hit a bar, then go home,” I tell him, yawning.

“Oh boo, you whore,” he grumbles, giving me the stink eye.

“You’re the whore,” I huff, getting into the elevator. “Who is it this month: Cristina, Sophie, Michelle?”

“Jealous?” He grins and pecks my cheek. I curb a smile and take his phone out of curiosity, looking on in dismay as his phone goes crazy with hits on my social media.

“Doesn’t that piss you off?” I ask as we hit the ground floor and head out the back to his car.

“No.” He shrugs. “I turn the notifications off after a while and then comment occasionally,” he says, leaning into me and holding his phone high to snap a selfie of us both, like a robot, I smile confidently, “or at least you comment occasionally.” He smirks. “You’re a busy woman.”

“You didn’t put the location up, did you?”

He deadpans me and gets in, dropping his phone in the central compartment. “Ye of little faith, of course not, plus no one knows you were doing a shoot for Donnie and Isaac. I never share your location,” he tells me over the throaty roar of his car starting up.

“I know, sorry, just usually you don’t post until the following day.” I’m glad we are leaving.

“Won’t happen again.” He winks, and we zip out of the car park at a breakneck speed.

Oscar shows no respect for the Highway Code or the safety of other road users. Twice I tell him to slow down, but he laughs loudly, speeds up and takes us down some side streets before we come to a sudden stop on double yellow lines.

“Fuck me, I need a drink,” he exhales as we exit the car and head into one of our favourite spots. I head straight for the bathroom, shouting my order to Oscar over my shoulder. I freshen up and take a few lonely minutes to enjoy the quiet before I head back to my friend, who is waiting for me with our drinks at the ready.

The bar is fairly quiet, and we’re able to relax for the next hour. I’ve got a pretty gruelling week ahead of me, so I can’t afford to be burning the candle at both ends. In fact, just thinking about it has me yawning again.

“Oscar, I’m ready to faceplant. Can we go?”

He gives me a sympathetic smile and pecks my shoulder.

“Sure, you need to slow down. ”

“No, I just need sleep,” I remind him. As soon as we are in his car and powering through London, I can feel myself start to drift. I don’t fight it. One minute I’m staring at the flash of streetlights, and the next, I’m slipping into a short but deep sleep.

~

I wake with a start, some subconscious notion telling me I’m not safe. I’m nestled into the seat of Oscar’s empty car, but he is nowhere to be seen. I blink groggily through the window into the darkening sky. The car park before me is unknown. Where the hell am I? Towering iron gates secure the perimeter, and car upon sleek car is lined up along a wall. Victorian lamps send a dusky glow on the pristine stone—the pebble so immaculate it looks like someone hoovered, then spit-shined the floor, taking extra care to make each stone glow.

I dial Oscar and wait, but no sooner has the call begun it disconnects. I stare back over my shoulder to the looming building and push free from the car. I try Oscar again, but it cuts off. Maybe he has no signal? Worry begins to creep in. I walk up and down the car park, trying to see if anyone else is about. Perhaps there is another person in a car I can speak to? I get to the

last low-slung car and bite my lip, wondering what's going on. Where is Oscar?

I stand for a moment in the private car park, my gaze sharp and critical. Now would be a good time for my friend to reemerge from wherever it is he has slipped off to. One thing I'm certain about is that he is in there, in that ostentatious building. I stare at it for a moment, trying to gauge what may be behind the light white brick and heavy black door. I will my eyes to see past the brick and mortar and scan the inside, desperate for some dormant sixth sense to appear and give me an answer, to supply me with x-ray vision or at the very least the blueprints, so I know what the hell I'm about to walk into.

My mind made up, I walk up the steps and give the door a confident knock. It echoes like a gong, sounding my arrival to the streets of London, and it makes me flinch. Well, they certainly know I'm here now. I wait, expecting for the door to click open, but after a few minutes, nothing happens. Leaning in, I press my ear to the door, listening out for footsteps but hearing nothing. Giving the heavy door a push to get a feel for its weight, I'm surprised that without noise, it opens ever so slightly; the gap opening up to give me a glimpse of black inside.

"If I die, Oscar..." I mutter. I check over my shoulder before my hand comes up, and I push my way in, peering around the door. Marble upon marble and pillars as thick as tree trunks splay out before me. They span the entire length of the entrance hall. Oh wow, it's a luxury hotel, is my initial thought, but the further I move inside, the less I am convinced of that. Where is everyone? Surely there would be a porter or a receptionist. On closer inspection, there is no reception, just an extravagant foyer, making me feel less welcome by the second. I falter in my steps and become indecisive. Maybe I should leave? I turn back to the door but chew my lip, tormented by what I should do. Why would Oscar leave me outside? What if something is wrong? I step away from the door, careful to keep the sound of my heels muted. I venture inside and crane my neck, hoping to see around the double staircase. It's opulent and easily the most beautiful place I have been inside. The stairs are complete with a sweeping balustrade that glides upwards to an open landing.

"Hello, Oscar?" I call out. How come he has never brought me here before?

Neck-high stone pots don huge leafy plants throughout the space. It's dark and exotic. I pick up gold trimmings here and there as they gleam off from the preposterous chandeliers that spew light everywhere. The black marble floor is like oil, smear-free, decadent, and I hate to admit, I love it.

"Oscar?" I daren't go much further into the entrance; tension fills my body because some part of me deep inside knows I'm not supposed to be in here. Choosing to come in here is a mistake. I can sense it like an insect crawling along my skin. The fear skitters and covers my body, needling at my nerves and into my mind, a warning beacon screaming at me to turn around. But I'm too curious to walk away now. I veer off to the left through the nearest door. It leads to a wide, dimly-lit hall, and beyond that, I hear the low heavy pulse of music. Its sensual purring, a steady rhythmic beat.

"Hello?" I whisper-shout. It's beyond peculiar that no one is about. Surely someone would have heard me knock. I follow the music, entranced by its melody. It begins to mirror my own heartbeat, pulsing faster as though we are in sync, and it can feel my trepidation. I trail after the music until I reach another set of double doors, and as I step up to them, they glide open, catching me by surprise.

Gasping, I jump back, expecting to be caught by someone, but I'm alone. I'd feel more at ease if there had been a host of people on entry, but this is surreal in its silence. I glance back down the corridor behind me, giving one final look for someone or something, a sign at least as to what I'm getting myself into. The music is louder here, enticing, more hypnotic. The room beyond is dark, but the moment I step forward, tiny dots in the ceiling purr on like a tidal wave. They roll on along the ceiling, showcasing a wide, elegant stairwell. I move forward again, and more lights blink on beneath my feet. Each wide step illuminates as I move down them, lighting the way. The lower I go, the louder the music becomes. It's still indistinct, but the bass is an addictive thump in my chest.

As soon as I reach the bottom step, I move through a low arch to an open seated area. The walls are three vases deep in foliage, and the stone floor reminds me to be quiet. The moment I step up to the frosted glass doors, I can feel the vibrations in my heeled feet. My palm rests on the door, and that too pulses from the heavy bass. I take a breath because I just know whatever is beyond this door is not for my eyes. I battle with a moment of hesitation before I hold my breath and push my way through.

Definitely not for my eyes. My eyes or any other woman's, it would seem. I step back as my eyes whip with gaping shock around the plush club: a plush, private, and luxurious strip club. The music is pouring through hidden speakers, the lighting low, but my eyes still seem to be able to take in each inch of bare skin of every half-naked and groin-grinding woman. I do a quick scan for Oscar, but I can't see him. The lights pulse and flash, illuminating bodies, then hiding them in the next second. Gulping, I move along the wall and freeze when a man requests his usual suite for a private dance.

"Girl number eighteen," he demands with a waft of his hand.

I hold my breath and walk quickly to the frosted doors. I push through and practically run up the stairs. The lights dance on with me, and I groan at their need to lighten my way. I don't want light; I don't want to be seen. This could wreck everything.

My heart racing, I push into the corridor panting and find I'm still alone. I do a quick check before I step into the entrance, sighing with relief that no one is here. No, they're all downstairs drooling over naked women. I shudder at the thought and pull the main door, but it doesn't budge.

"Shit."

"Can I help you?" I freeze, my body going stiff as a board at the deep timbre voice behind me. I know I look guilty. There is too much tension in my shoulders. I try to relax, taking a slow, calming breath, and it works for the most part. I mentally panic over what to say. Do I straight up apologise for trespassing, or do I angle for the truth? Maybe I can say I was lost or my tyre burst. Shit, double shit. I bite my lip, telling myself I've got this, and turn with a fixed smile. It couldn't fall off my face faster if it was slapped off.

I'm staring wide-eyed at a huge man, with wide thick shoulders and long, lean legs, dense thighs, and a strong neck. I don't know what makes me capture all those things about him, but he is just a shock to my senses. He is leaning against one of the black pillars, his shirt rolled up, revealing plenty of tattoos, tattoos that no longer allow for bare skin. The marring of images all swirled and sculpted along his body look as intricate as the black marble pillars all around. His collar is undone, and there too, I find more black ink swirling up the thick column of his neck to a darkened jaw and stifling black eyes. It's not a friendly gaze. Cold, dark, and unflinching. His narrowed and cool stare has the hairs on my skin springing to attention. My

eyes do another quick sweep out of worry, and I see he is loosely holding a tumbler of clear liquid in his fingertips. Even his hands are decorated in black ink. I stare, he stares, and every inch of my body crackles with a feeling I can't decipher; don't want to decipher. Swallowing, I look back to the hall, willing Oscar to stroll through.

"I've always wondered, should anyone rudely let themselves into my property, what I would do. You, Zara Reid, were never factored into that equation." He breaks the silence, and my eyes search his. What does that mean? I hum, not sure how to take him. He's big, tall, commanding and dark. Eyes blacker than the marble, hair to match, and like my own, it's sleek. "You're not welcome here."

Wow. Rude, much! I'm seconds from telling this tyrant to fuck off when he adjusts his stance, and I cop a look at a weapon slid casually into the back of his fitted trousers. He moved on purpose, knowing I would notice. My eyes slam to his, and they flash with satisfaction.

"I'm looking for my friend," I tell him, ensuring every ounce of fear is hidden deep inside. Men like him thrive off fear, binge on power, and wallow in others' misfortune.

"Mr Winters is busy," he announces, pushing away from the pillar and placing his empty tumbler on the slim mantel. He inhales, and my eyes widen at the sheer power of this guy. There is a lethal grace to how he moves. I have no doubt he can move with speed. His hands could swallow my face whole.

His outfit is beyond rich: handmade, stunning. He looks like a dark dream. And those eyes, they are an endless black abyss of nothing. No emotion. No warmth. Cold and dangerous. Killer. The thought comes quickly, and I want to wash it away, but I know I'm correct in my assessment of him. I've met his type before. Cruel. Unscrupulous. I grit my teeth as he moves closer to me, closing the space between us. I try the handle again, briefly turning away, and he joins me, resting himself against my only escape. The door wanes under his weight. Fuck, he's right next to me. I can feel heat emanating from his body and smell the rich and woody scent of his aftershave. My hand shakes, so I tighten it around the metal of the knob to hide my fear. I keep my back to him.

"Do you always let yourself into unknown places?"

I grit my teeth and mentally slap myself repeatedly at my stupidity for coming in here. Stupid, stupid woman!

Chapter Three

An absurd and sickening thought enters my mind. What if *they* are in here? What if Oscar's on their side, and this was a trap? My pulse skitters to an unhealthy pace. My mouth dries as dizziness washes over me, sending a cold sweat to break out across my skin. I keep the handle tight in my grip to keep me on my feet.

When I reply, my voice is husky.

"No, I think I should wait in the car," I say, pulling on the handle, hoping he will be kind and let me go.

"I can't let you do that," he rumbles, breathing deeply and slowly.

I'm not short by any means, but this man is tall, so much so that he casts a shadow over me. Twisting slowly, I come to find him still resting against the door, his big shoulder leaning into the frame as he looks down his beautifully cruel face at me.

"You can," I say in a perplexed murmur, "I shouldn't have come in."

"No, you shouldn't. Oscar won't be long. Come this way," he says, pushing up. His weight makes the door groan, and I swallow a curse, fighting with myself to climb out the nearest window or follow him. I refuse to let him know I'm intimidated. I push off the door and shake my hair out, hearing him chuckle when I straighten my back.

I narrow my eyes at his enjoyment in all this, keeping my strides even and determined as I follow him. We skirt around the staircase and further into the building, taking a wide arch and heading down another corridor until he suddenly stops. I almost crash into his back and huff out my annoyance when I hear the gruff murmur of his enjoyment.

"You did that on purpose," I scold, finding his antics childish. I know they are anything but. This is a man who enjoys tormenting others. His unwavering gaze holds mine, and I can see he is fighting a smirk as he nods at a set of doors, and I frown at him, looking to the wood, then him.

"Ladies first," he murmurs. I don't trust him, but I push through anyway, telling myself Oscar wouldn't have brought me here if I were in danger. It's

the only thing keeping me from losing my cool around the hulk of a man at my back. Again, I can feel the heat of his chest emanating through my dress. He's so close: too close. I don't like it. I skip ahead to put some distance between us, ignoring the deep rumble of a laugh rattling about his big chest. His amusement makes me vibrate with anger.

I am so concerned with how close he is to my back that I don't realise we are standing in an opulent masculine office until my intimidator circles around me and walks over to the drinks cabinet, pulling a bottle of water out.

"Drink?" he offers. I shake my head, but my thick, dry throat argues. "Sure?" He smirks.

I lift my chin.

"Very," I quip, narrowing my eyes whilst his spark with humour once again. "What's so funny?" I spit, irritated by his games.

His brow lifts at my challenge.

"Why you are, Zara. I can see how much you want to tell me to go *fuck* myself, but you can't—you dare not. And you'd be right not to." The lid gets twisted off, and he is lifting the bottle to guzzle half the contents, his eyes held fast on mine. The way he says *fuck* propels my mind back to those women downstairs, and my heart flutters wildly.

My fists clench into tiny balls by my side, little fists that would be no match for this man. His palm would dwarf both my hands.

"You always such an arse?" I give him a pointed look, deciding to show a little fight. More stupidity on my part, I'm certain. The urge to do exactly as he mentioned is burning on my tongue, and I hate that he can read me so well, hate that he knows I don't dare give him a very honest piece of my mind.

"More so than not." He swigs the last bit of water before dropping it in the bin.

I have no idea what possesses the next question to leave the safety of my mouth. "And when you're not?" This has him smiling darkly.

"Stick around and find out." His chin lifts, daring me to do so. Oh, he is enjoying this so much.

"No thanks, where is Oscar?" I look away, unfazed, yet I'm anything but. I feel sick, and I'm trying to think of everything to leave. Maybe I can make a run for the door. I look around intently, and my eyes linger there.

"Busy."

“Doing what?” My tone is demanding. I skate a look around the room, similar to the entrance, pretentious and stinking of money.

“Being reminded of the rules,” he grunts, taking himself to his desk and sitting down. I frown at him. He looks enormous sitting behind it. He twists his chair, so he is facing away, then a screen is flickering on, and he points to the moving image. It’s the club from earlier. “Tell me, what do you see?” he questions seriously. I scoff at him and take myself back towards the door, not wishing to look at the vulgarity on the screen. “Walk out of that door, and I’ll drag you back in here and lay you over my knee,” he seethes. I stop dead and turn around, looking at him with an open mouth and in complete shock. Did he actually just threaten to tan my arse!

“You’re nuts!” I laugh shortly, my mouth flattening when he shrugs nonchalantly.

“You’re in my fucking club, a *private* club,” he accentuates. “You’d be wise to put that little arse in that chair.” He points with the TV control to a chair opposite his own. “And start paying attention.” His jaw is clenched, and I know he is done messing about.

I’m almost ninety-nine percent sure I’m going to walk out of here, but when the heavy thud of his gun hits the desk, I pale and walk unwillingly to the chair, closer to him and the gun.

“Good girl.” His nostrils flare, and relaxing back in his seat, he nods to the screen. “So tell me, Zara, what do you see?” At first, my eyes stay on him, taking in his square darkened jaw and unflinching cruel eyes. Full lips set in a straight line and hair cut in a military crop, his brow lifts, and reluctantly, I look at the screen and away from the chunk of life-threatening metal left carelessly on the desk. “Do you see any women freely walking around my club?” It hadn’t occurred to me before, but no, I don’t see any on the floor—they are everywhere, but the club floor remains very much a male space. What relevance does this have to me?

“No,” I mutter, debating why that is, but not really caring.

“No women through the door, no women on the floor.” His cold tone reaches out and twists my guts up into a ball of nauseating nerves. I’m shaking, my hands knotted beneath the desk.

“Great slogan, you should get that on a plaque above the entrance,” I tell him in a rush of nerves. I can’t stop talking. His hand clenches, the remote control groans in protest, and I swallow loudly. “I’d like to leave,” I say calmly.

He stands and walks to the screen, places his hands in his pockets and from this position, I can see the ridge of muscles all over his body and the faint outline of tattoos below his white shirt.

“I’d like a lot of things,” he comments dryly. “You see, Zara, I have rules, and you just broke them. Oscar, too,” he mutters, scratching his prickly jaw. My eyes fall back to the screen, and I now notice that some of the women are blindfolded. I shudder at the reality of what is happening beneath my feet, what those women might be subjected to by cruel, powerful men like this one. How did they come to be here? Did they choose this?

“Not intentionally,” I reply on a short huff. “I had no idea what this place was. It’s just an unfortunate mistake this happened.” I stare at him through the curtain of my hair. Our eyes clash, and I feel the black orbs of his like a dagger to my throat. He has his death stare down to a fine art. He’s killed before. I can feel it, and a sickly sweep of innate fear blows over my skin, seeping into my pores until it wraps around my bones.

“Mistake isn’t a word I like to hear.” I’m sure ‘go to hell’ and ‘go fuck yourself’ aren’t either, but I want to use those too. I’d love nothing more than to tell this bear of a man to go fuck himself.

“I was curious,” I admit. That and concern for Oscar had dragged me into this mess.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he says flippantly back. “Bad choices come with bad consequences,” he tells me with a shrug.

“Well then, I feel it’s appropriate to tell you having to suffer your company these past ten minutes has been a consequence I don’t wish to repeat.” The words come out in a jumble of horror, my eyes widening as each syllable leaves my damn stupid mouth.

He throws his head back and laughs deeply, loudly. After a few moments, he slowly composes himself, and when he does, he is the picture of self-control: serious and grave. A shiver runs through me.

“Women aren’t welcome here,” he states harshly.

My confused eyes go back to the screen, where I see plenty of women.

“So the breasts filling the room downstairs are what, really advanced sex dolls?” I drawl, realising my error and biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself from talking further. He scoffs out another laugh, then his eyes drop to the gun on his desk, as do mine. I refuse to swallow the ball of fear now

lodged in my throat, and I keep my stare on his. I refuse to baulk fully—my pride won't allow for it.

“They work for me, but they don't work the floor. I have rules, expectations.” With another click, I'm seeing the club from a different angle. It's an aerial view from above. I give him a tight smile. Then the image changes again, and we're looking at one of the glass walls made up of a dozen or so glass cells, each holding a woman dancing provocatively. I frown in distaste.

“Look harder,” he encourages.

I look, really look.

“The women are all out of reach. No women are on the floor,” I repeat his words. The only women close enough to touch are swinging themselves around poles on the podiums, but security separates them from the men leering in their suits. I don't care how seemingly protected these women are, I feel sick to my stomach. I've had the misfortune of meeting men like him.

“No women on the floor,” he repeats. “The only rule I have, and you broke it,” he growls quietly, and my eyes go back to the glass wall of women.

I swallow loudly.

“Well, glass coffins aren't really my style, but you've made your point regardless,” I squeak. When he moves towards me, his chest expands with a large exhale, and bright eyes flash with anger.

“Has anyone ever told you that you've got a smart mouth?” he bites out, leaning over me, so I push back in my seat.

“No. You're the first. Gold star for you.” I fake press a little star to his wide flank, inwardly flinching when I realise how solid it is. My face sags in fear as he takes my bony wrist and yanks me to him, lifting me to my feet as his teeth kiss out his constant irritation with me.

“Well, you do, and it's fucking annoying,” he growls into my face.

“Noted.” I swallow. I blink rapidly at his diamond-hard stare. “Ouch,” I whisper when his fist tightens. He drops my arm immediately, then lifts it to inspect for any damage. I withdraw it and rub the sore area, scowling at him.

“I apologise. I didn't intend to hurt you.” His tone, although remorseful, does not match the angry glare pointed my way. Frowning, I refuse to meet his gaze and hum. I suspect he did. I don't think this man has a kind bone in

his body. A big soft hand takes my chin, and I flinch but stay connected as he lifts my face to his.

“This is an exclusive gentlemen’s club, the only women lucky enough to be in here, dance.” His eyes sweep my face and stop on my postbox red lips. Lucky my arse!

“Seems I missed the application process.” I swallow thickly. His eyes flash, but his lips twitch. My face is dropped, and he returns to the fridge to retrieve another bottle of water. He holds it up. “No thanks,” I say quietly.

“You sure? If you swallow any more, your mouth will resemble the Sahara,” he mutters.

I lick my lips.

“Yes, I’m sure.” He points to the chair, demanding that I sit, and I do, as he begins to drain another bottle of water. For a moment, his eyes are cast away, and I can really look at him. I see the dip of scars and smooth tan skin, but beyond that is just an expanse of tattoos. He is categorically the most handsome man I have ever seen, and in my business, I have come across a lot, have worked with many, and despite the danger that surrounds this man, his beauty is all-consuming. It absorbs its audience and mocks the definition of man. He is a dark delight.

“You’re staring, Miss Reid.”

I jump, caught red-handed.

“Well, I’m sitting in your office with a gun less than a foot from my face, so forgive me for being a little concerned,” I snap. I battle with asking for his name, but I know he won’t tell me. He chose not to introduce himself back in the foyer, and he’s made it clear I’m not welcome here. It seems unlikely that he would willingly offer me more information, even something as simple as his name. I’m far too stubborn to ask for it or to give him the satisfaction of knowing I’m intrigued.

“And that warrants you to look at me, does it?” he quips. *So we’re back to playing games?*

“It’s not going to shoot itself,” I grate.

He moves and picks it up; the barrel facing me, and he looks over it as I hold my breath. My heart begins to palpitate and stops before I let out a silent breath when he drops it into a drawer. His eyes lift, and he looks over me thoroughly. The black dress is skimpy by most standards, but it feels see-through when his night-dark eyes trail over me.

“Going out for the night?” he wonders.

“I had a shoot earlier.”

“Ah, so you can fire a gun, but I can’t?” His tone is grave, but I can see he is playing me.

“I’ve never held a gun in my life.”

“Do you want to?” he asks me. It’s such an out-of-place question that I laugh.

“No, do you want to model this dress?” I scoff, flicking my hair over my shoulder and relaxing back in my chair.

“I think we both know it looks far better on you than it would me.”

“Hmm.” I refuse to meet his eye. I tug at the short hem where my bright red nails draw his eyes to the movement. “How long will Oscar be?” I say, clearing my throat.

“Any moment,” he replies gruffly.

“Good.” I nod. I want to get out of here and away from this colossal man. He lowers back into his own chair, and we sit in silence. After a beat, I lift my gaze, and he is inspecting me openly. Neither of us blinks, and I hold his stare as second after second ticks past and tension begins to pulse between us. The silence is deafening, the tension palpable, but the heated gaze keeps me rooted to my chair. My eyes never flinch from his, and after what feels like minutes, his jaw ticks. It’s such a small movement that I barely see it, but his breath leaves his nostrils on a heavy exhale, and I too breathe more heavily, but I refuse to break under his stare. I won’t let him win.

Chapter Four

There is a loud knock at the door, and I jump a little. The suited man in front of me smiles darkly, and I scowl back over his desk at him.

“Some friend, leaving you out in the dark,” he murmurs, his head tilting so he can regard me further. I shift in my seat. It had crossed my mind, but I trust Oscar explicitly. I trust him more than any other person, although I did have a moment earlier where my fears eclipsed all rational thoughts, and I believed Oscar to be in on my downfall.

“Come in!” he calls. His deep voice carries, and the door opens. I don't turn because something stops me from looking away from him: he commands respect, acknowledgement. “Ah, Oscar, we were expecting you,” he hums.

The low grunt of pain has me spinning quickly. Oscar is slumped between two men, his face a bloody, bruised mess. “Oh my God.” My eyes fly back to the owner of the club, but his face is expressionless. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I spit, rushing to my beaten friend, who is barely conscious, and my eyes prick with tears.

“Many a thing.” The deep voice is right at my back. I stiffen but refuse to look round at him. I scoop Oscar out of the arms of the two men who carried him in with distaste, and although I'm half their size, they drop him into my grasp, causing me to grunt at his weight. Keeping him upright is a difficult task, and it is complicated more by my heels. I don't ask for help while I struggle with my friend, huffing and groaning as I pull him along. They follow and watch me, and when someone curses; *him*, the owner, I feel Oscar's weight tugged out of my grip. I'm shaking—my eyes filling with hot tears. I pull him back.

“No! No!” I slap at his chest, tears slipping down my cheeks. “Get off. You. Fucking. Get. Off!” I spit, hitting him between each broken word. His lips twist, and he drops Oscar's weight fully back to me. I huff along as my poor friend groans in pain, trying to shift him as I go until I'm at the door. One of his henchmen pulls it open wide for me. I refuse to thank them and

struggle through with Oscar slumped over me. I kick my heels off, knowing I will never manage the stone floor with Oscar weighing me down.

“A souvenir!” I growl.

“Not really my style.” He glowers from the door.

“Feel free to poke them in your eye.” I manage to get Oscar’s keys and roll him into the car. He whimpers, and I suck in a breath when I see just how much blood is covering his top.

I kiss his brow and whisper, “I’m so sorry.” It comes out in a rush of nauseating truth. I wish I had never stepped foot in that damn club!

~

I hotfoot it to the nearest hospital and stumble my way in with Oscar. Given his current state, I’m quickly relieved of his weight as nurses rush to my aid, taking him from me. I sniff through a false explanation as to why my friend is barely conscious. We are ushered through to a private area away from the shocked faces of other patients. I want to cry when a petite nurse hands me some water and assures me they will take care of him. For the next few hours, I wait whilst Oscar is off having scans. I’m nervously anticipating his return in his room when the door opens, and I come face to face with *him*, again. I stand quickly and look around for something to protect myself with. Why else is he here, if not to harm Oscar further?

My tired and confused eyes find his. I’m weary with concern, riled with anger and, surprisingly, filled with curiosity about this man. There is no way he slipped in here unseen. He isn’t easily missed. I hate that he has found me so easily. Who on earth is this man?

“You’re not welcome here,” I tell him through dry lips. The level of worry I have felt for my friend has left me feeling exhausted. He was unconscious until I handed him over to the staff when he began to panic at being in a hospital. Only after I managed to calm him down and persuade him that the people who mugged him weren’t around did his swollen, bruised eyes show some relief. He was worried I was going to out him, confess his involvement with some big scary bloke. I didn’t need to. The culprit is brazenly standing before me.

“Now, now that’s not very nice.” The door clicks shut, and the room seems to shrink in size, he’s just that big. I wipe my palm down my face. I’m not sure I can deal with this now, *him*.

“Don't worry. We kept your dirty secret. I told them Oscar was mugged. You can go now. No need to knock me about too.” A small uncontrollable hiccup leaves me, and I drop down into the seat. A small part of me that has been blindly tripping around for years wishes he would just get it over with if he's going to hurt me. I will him to do it as I stare blankly at him. The moment hangs between us, and my heart skitters rapidly.

He inclines his head and walks towards me.

“I have no desire to hurt you.” I can smell him now, the woody, rich scent, which is oddly a nice change from the clinical fragrance of the hospital.

“You already did,” my voice is low, gravelly. I've cried on and off, and it shows. My eyes are puffy, and my lips are swollen from chewing them anxiously.

“I already told you I didn't mean to grab you roughly earlier.” His deep frown makes his already harsh face scarily stark. Thick lashes and endless black eyes give this man an edge of cruelty that sends shivers down my spine.

“I meant my friend,” I spit, slapping my hand to my chest. My heart hurts for Oscar. There is a blink of discomfort in him, but as quick as it was there, it is gone. “Please go,” I say, rubbing my temples. I'm still in my damn shoot outfit, and my feet are bare. I look ridiculous.

“The press are outside,” he informs me quietly.

“Good for them,” I mutter. What is his game? Was beating my friend not enough? Is he here to finish the job? “Are you going to hurt him?” I ask quietly. The stillness of the room seems to scream now we are alone. My question hangs in the air, and after a few minutes, I wonder if I've been left alone, but when I look up, he is sitting watching me from the bed, his jacket folded neatly at his side. “What do you want?” I spit desperately.

“Stalin will deliver some clothes for you, shoes too.” He points to my sore feet. “Mr Winter's car has been removed from the car park, so you will need to arrange separate transport.” What? Why would he take his car?

“Who the hell are you?” I stutter. Is he with *them*?

“I believe the lesson will have been learnt. Goodbye, Zara.” He stands and gathers up his jacket. I'm still trying to come to terms with what he has said when he walks out, leaving me alone.

When I wake, it takes a few moments for my brain to click into gear. As soon as it does, my eyes flash open, and I twist my neck to check on Oscar, who is fast asleep still. His bruised eye is black and blue, his lips swollen and bloodied. He looks dreadful. Unintentionally, I caused that, and the guilt it provokes in me crushes my lungs. I still have no idea how or why he is caught up with the likes of that club owner. I quietly lift a hand to finger a stray, coiled lock away from his face, and his face twitches, but he remains asleep. I can think of a thousand things I could be doing, but instead, I stay nestled under my quilt, watching my friend as he sleeps off his painkillers. Every now and again, his face tightens, or his breath stutters out, and I expect his deep brown eyes to bore into mine, but after an hour, he is still lost to the medication.

Sighing, I slip out of the covers and grab a shower. I need to be awake and put together when he does come round. I abandoned my skincare routine last night and cried most of my makeup off, so I take extra care getting myself up and ready. Last night, when Oscar had finally come around, he chose to discharge himself. Any other time, he would have stayed put, but I think he was scared. I'm sitting cross-legged on the ottoman in my walk-in, applying my moisturiser, when Oscar appears in the mirror behind me.

“Oh, thank god,” I exclaim, rushing to him. He puts his hands up, keeping me at a distance, and sighs raggedly. “Are you in much pain? You're due more tablets.” I tell him, lifting his hair away. Sad eyes find mine, and I stare hopelessly into them. “What have you got yourself into?” I whisper sympathetically.

His shoulders droop, and I move into him, hugging him loosely.

“I can't even remember much of what happened,” he confesses. Probably not such a bad thing, and the look I give him conveys as much. I dread to think what he endured to get as battered as he is.

I give him a quick and basic rundown of last night's events.

“Who is that man, Oscar? Do you work for him?” I demand.

“He's bad news.” He sighs, moving to sit on the ottoman with me. My wardrobe is too much of a temptation, and he reaches up and pulls a big coat down, pulling it on and leaning into me. “I'm sorry I got you caught up in this, Z. Did he hurt you?” Oscar's eyes flick to me uncertainly.

I shake my head and wrap my arm around his shoulders.

“God, I look pathetic.” He winces in the mirror, and my wry smile twists into a laugh.

“You kind of do, but you also look in a lot of pain. Let me grab you some tablets.” He shifts so I can get up. I stop at his feet and look down at his forlorn, bruised face. “Who is he?” I ask again, more calmly. Demanding but soft.

“Callan Scott.” He offers up on a tired sigh. “He owns a few clubs. That one last night is the most exclusive, private.” I nod. I already know that.

Callan. The name suits him.

“It’s a strip club.” I’m blunt and unforgiving. I’m cross that he’s been lying, and that he is exploiting those women. Some of them may enjoy the work, but I can guarantee a percentage of those women are there because life handed them a shit deal. “So you work there then?” I wonder.

He shakes his head and nods to the open door. “The tablets?” He pops his bottom lip out for effect.

“Fine, but I want answers, Oscar.”

“I know,” he says. His tiredness suggests at having kept this secret for a while, and now it’s out, he is giving in to it. I give him one last reproachful look over my shoulder before I head down to the kitchen. I hear Oscar make his own way down, then find him draped over the sofa like a cheap rug, my fur coat in tow. I give him a raised brow, and he lifts his arms, displaying the coat fully. “I feel like a pimp in this.”

“Probably should have worn it last night,” I comment.

“Very clever,” he mutters. “This isn’t real fur, is it?” he asks, his lip curling.

“No!” I scowl. “Here.” Handing him some water and tablets, I take a seat beside him and flick the TV on. I’m glad I have a free day. I was really mad at him last night for leaving the hospital, but he does seem okay, just in pain.

“Thanks.” I give him a few minutes, letting the tablets do their work before I start to question him.

“That guy,” I start, “Callan. He seems too dangerous to just be a club owner.” He looked like he could give Rocky Balboa a run for his money. “What’s his deal, anyway?”

Oscar shrugs. “I don’t know much about him.” I practically roll my eyes into the back of my head. What a big fat lie.

“But you work for him?” I’m trying to lay the foundations and work out what’s going on. Oscar certainly isn’t being forthcoming.

“Kind of,” he says around a deep gulp of water.

“Oscar, quit stalling,” I snap.

“Honestly, Z, all I know is my cousin Tony works for him, security, and that Callan is mean as fuck,” he adds when I turn to look at him. “I just package drop.” His small shoulder shrugs under the big coat.

“You know when you say package drop in context with a strip club it leads my thoughts astray.” I quip.

“It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like because you're starting to piss me off,” I tell him, my patience wearing thin.

Running a hand through his mop of curls, he shrugs.

“I can't tell you. I don't know anything myself. I just get told where to pick the package up, and then I take it to Skyn,” he mutters.

“Skyn?”

“The club.”

“How original,” I mutter, recalling all the beautiful women sliding down poles in their barely there outfits for their big, scarily beautiful boss. I stare at nothing, reliving last night and the tension-filled interaction between Callan Scott and myself.

It annoyed me that he knew my name. Fashion models seem an unlikely interest for a man like Callan, or is it just that he was being diligent and had looked into Oscar, and that in turn led to me? I’m pulled out of my thoughts when Oscar says, “I am sorry, Zara.”

“Surely I should be saying that to you. Look at you.”

“It’s my own fault. I knew not to take you there. I know the risks.”

“Will you go back?” I ask tentatively. I hope not.

He shakes his head and points to his face.

“I think this was Callan's way of telling me I’m no longer of use.” I embrace that thought gladly, feeling lighter than I have all morning. Good. I don't want him going back. He’s too good for those kinds of people, and I certainly don't want to be caught up in that kind of situation again.

“Are you feeling better?” I ask. He nods, and I peck his cheek. “Let me make us some breakfast.” I get up heading to the kitchen.

“Not a smoothie!” he yells. “I need actual food,” he grumbles.

“You're in no shape to make demands. I was going to make us those pancakes you like,” I call back. Bossy sod!

We spend the day on the sofa watching reruns and order in. Oscar seems happier knowing he is off Callan's clock now, and I keep telling myself it's a good thing, but when I lay down in bed that night, all I can see are those icy black irises and that pumped up chest. There's no denying Callan is an asshole, but he is exceptionally handsome: cruel but beautiful. Not that I should care about any of those things, and I don't.

I don't care.

It's a lie I will keep telling myself here on out.

Chapter Five

I have an early meeting with a magazine, so I get up early and make myself a smoothie. I keep my makeup neutral but paint my lips bright red. I've gone for a cream playsuit and longline jacket. I'm spraying my jet-black hair into place when Oscar drops down on the ottoman.

"You look hot," he states and holds out a pair of heels I had placed on the ottoman. "Wear these—the others are too demure."

"Thanks." I smile and slip my feet into the shoes. "Help yourself to whatever," I tell him.

"What? Carrot sticks and water, you're too kind," he drawls. "Please tell me you're free next Friday night. I need an evening out, and I need to get laid," he confesses.

"What, looking like that?" I chide.

"This is exactly why. Think of all the sympathy sex." He grins.

"You're in luck," I say through the mirror, fixing my earrings and checking my lipstick before I put it in my bag. I run my hand over my necklace, straightening it out before looking at him behind me. "We can unwind on Saturday," I tell him, kissing my hand and patting his cheek with it. "There are fatty snacks in the cupboard, and don't steal my coat," I tell him, walking through my bedroom and out into the hall.

"Like I'd be seen dead in it!" he says, clutching it to his chest.

"You've worn it for the last twenty-four hours," I call back on a laugh.

"Inside!" he defends. I don't reply. I'm halfway down the stairs and out of the door before his middle finger appears at the top of the stairs. I wonder if he has any idea how ridiculous he looks, battered, half-naked and wearing a thigh-length fur coat. I lock him in and head to my car. A hefty range rover ambles past, and I have to press myself into my vehicle to let it pass, muttering a curse at their lack of spatial awareness. I slip into my Jaguar and head into the city.

Miranda Astell, my agent, is waiting for me in The Atrium at The Mayfair. I order myself a hot lemon water and take a seat opposite her. Her

eyes do one quick and severe sweep of me.

“Have you been sleeping well?” Her tone is critical, but I know she cares.

Tutting, I smile as my drink is placed down.

“Of course, all work, no play,” I tell her. “Can you send me the itinerary? I’ve not received it yet.” I’ve planned a quiet weekend with Oscar, as I have a busy schedule before I fly out to Greece at the end of the month for a shoot.

“Oh, I thought I had sent it over.” Her perplexed frown turns into annoyance when she checks her emails and finds her perfectly organised self is missing one email to me.

“Have you been sleeping well?” I murmur, curbing a smirk.

“Oh, give over. It’s this bloody renovation. The house is in uproar, nothing is where I put it, or it’s boxed away, and now there is a delay—fucking builders,” she bitches, slanting a look about to ensure she isn’t overheard.

“It will be worth it though,” I remind her, sipping my drink. She tucks her short red hair behind her ear and lifts her fruit tea. She is more slender than me, fair-skinned and classically beautiful, where my skin has a latte undertone, and my black hair is as bold as her red. Miranda was London’s IT girl back when I was running barefoot and playing with dolls: innocent and naïve. Now I know differently. Know that life is crueller than any story I ever read or any life I’d ever choose.

“I hope so, because if I have to stay another week in that hotel, I’ll be needing a wig because my hair is going to fall out. Don’t ever let me do something like this again, bored or not. It’ll kill me off,” she huffs. My phone pings with an email, and I thank her. “What time is Lauren due here?” she asks me. I asked Miranda to come along and help pass the time, as Lauren is utterly boring. I’ve worked with Lauren before; she is a magazine journalist.

“Any minute. She said eight-thirty.” I check my watch and glance a look outside.

“She’s cutting it fine.”

“She’s probably setting up. We’re in a suite,” I tell her.

“That outfit screams power,” she tells me. I smile briefly, and my mind falls back to the other night and Callan Scott. My heart does an unusual flip, and a shiver runs over me. He really is like no other man I have ever met.

“Oscar thought so too.”

“Oh, how is he? I still can’t believe he was mugged,” she whispers. Had he not been beaten to a pulp, he would be here. Oscar escorts me to most places and is forever telling me he is my best accessory.

“I think he’s having breakfast with his mother,” I lie. I’m surprised news of his mugging hasn’t hit front-page news. However, there were minimal photos, and we made it out of the hospital unseen.

“How he puts up with that woman, I will never know,” Miranda murmurs, her eyes slipping to something over my shoulder. “Oh, here’s Lauren.” She lifts her hand, giving a roll of her fingers.

I stand as Lauren approaches. Her eyes do an envious sweep of me, but her smile is genuine. She is a mousy little thing, super cute, and full of smiles.

“Hi, Lauren, how are you?”

She lifts her heavily bangled arm, tucking her straight hair behind her ear.

“Hi, Zara. And Miranda, I wasn’t expecting you. What a lovely surprise.” Her brows pinch, but her smile remains.

“Zara and I are due a catch up, shall we?” Miranda moves past Lauren, and we make our way into the lobby.

“We’re on the fourth floor, junior suite,” she says, taking us to the bank of elevators. We all get in, but as we do, I shudder, some irrational thought warning me something is wrong. I twist, looking back out into the lobby, but the doors slide shut, and I’m left wondering who, or what, made me feel so on edge. “Gerry is ready for you. After the shoot, we’ll break, then proceed with the interview.”

“Great. Shall we?” I say as the doors open. Miranda takes the lead, obviously knowing where we are going and eager to get this done with as much as I am.

“In a rush?” I ask, fighting a chuckle.

“Not at all. Why would you think that?” she throws sarcastically over her shoulder, her red hair bouncing around her face. “It’s not like my home is in disarray, my office is reduced to a damn box, and my house smells like plaster and paint.”

“In that case, let’s get to it.” I grin. Lauren laughs lightly as she gestures to a set of double doors up ahead.

“It’s just through here. Can I get you both a drink?” she asks, leaving the doors wide for us to walk in. I check over my shoulder before we enter, that same feeling dwelling in my stomach.

“Are you okay?” my agent asks, her hand lying on my upper arm. I throw her a dazzling smile.

“Yes, of course. Thought I clocked some paps.” The fib rolls off my lips easily, and any further worries are lost when Lauren introduces me to her team, and we begin the shoot.

I keep my back straight and tuck my hands into my suit trouser pockets; the stance pushing my longline blazer back. I hook my ankles whilst Beth, an assistant, tucks my hair behind my ears. I lift my head as Gerry gushes about how incredible I look.

“You scream power! I love it.” He snaps a few more, then requests I lean against a deep mahogany sideboard. “Darling, you look sensational.” Beth fuffs with my hair. “Zara, you’re a dream,” Gerry compliments. I take my place again against the sideboard whilst he gets his shot. “Window shot, then we’re done,” he promises me.

Two hours later, and we’re finally through with the shoot. Gerry is clearing up his equipment, and Miranda hightailed it out of here after her builder called with an issue, so it’s just Lauren and me. She fires questions in rapid succession, and I answer just as quickly, just as truthfully. She goes on and on about my success, my campaigns, collaborations and new perfume, the mention of a clothing line and how I’m not just a model but a businesswoman.

“Miranda is a great agent, supportive, she’s been in the game a long time, and her advice is paramount when I’m looking to further myself,” I say breezily, watching her observe me like a rare artefact and not a person.

“She scouted you at sixteen. It’s been highly suggested you were homeless prior to that point.” Lauren clears her throat, seeming uncomfortable, but her eyes gleam hopefully. My face pinches, but I keep a fixed smile on my face.

I laugh her comment off. “Well, as you can see, that isn’t the case. I’m thoroughly enjoying throwing myself into new ventures and pursuing new avenues to push myself intellectually and grow in this industry.” She looks disappointed, as if she honestly thought I would bare my soul to her.

“Grow. You’re twenty-four and London’s most sought-out model. Can you go higher?” Her laugh is light, but her gaze is a little jealous.

“I guess only the limitless will know. As you mentioned earlier, my perfume is due to launch soon. I’m working with Georgie Blare, and I’ve loved being part of the process, experimenting with scents and assisting with designs. It’s been a huge learning curve.” Every word is practised, precise, and aimed to appease my fans and draw more labels to seek me out.

“You seem like you’re ready to take on the world. You model for the biggest names, and your portfolio boasts fashion designers from around the globe. What is the one thing that keeps you grounded? How do you not let it all carry you away?” By the look on Lauren’s face, I feel like this is one question she personally wants the answer to.

It’s the easiest question I’ve ever answered.

“Honestly, I appreciate the opportunities presented to me. It’d be silly not to. But at the end of it all, I’m still just a person, no different from you or any other woman. I love sharing these moments with some of the biggest creative minds and artists in the world, but my health, that’s important, and my friends.”

“You have no family.” She’s back to being uncomfortable again.

“No, perhaps that’s what keeps me grounded. I have all this, but when it starts and solely ends with just myself, it doesn’t seem so glamorous. I’m enjoying my life. It’s a huge adventure, and I can’t wait to see where this path takes me, but I also like to slob out and watch awful TV. When I’m not working, I spend my time with my friends.”

“Oscar Winters.” She names him specifically because, outside of associates, he is my only true friend. Miranda is the only other person close to me, but neither of them know who I truly am.

“Yes,” I gush, “he is my biggest fan. We are practically joined at the hip, and he champions me wherever he goes. He is a huge fashion guru, has a keen eye for new designers, and I’m hoping one day he’ll branch out into the world of fashion,” I say honestly.

“So, does he help with your wardrobe?”

“He’d plan it if he could. Sometimes I come home, and he has rearranged the whole dressing room into seasons. I swear he has OCD.” I laugh, thinking of that particular time when I arrived home to find he had moved the entire room around.

“You two are very close.” Lauren eyes me with a soft smile—her hands clasped together on her narrow knees.

“Yes, god, he will hate me for telling you all this.” I manage to steer it away from my past, and we focus more on future campaigns and my upcoming swimwear shoot. After another hour, we finally call it a day.

I take a moment to nip to the washroom and freshen up. My lipstick is fine, so I touch up my foundation and exit into the lobby. I'm a few steps short of the door when the hairs on my arms raise, and I stop, some sixth sense alerting me I'm not alone. Checking over my shoulder, I look around, finding fairly inconspicuous guests enjoying their lunch or moving about the hotel, but something doesn't feel right. Straightening my back, I walk out of the doors to my car, idling outside. I waste no time in getting in and locking the doors.

“Thanks,” I throw carelessly out the window at the valet, my eyes sweeping the street for someone, a car, anything. I'm shaking, so I take care driving home, circling more than necessary. I do a full detour until I feel I can park up out front. Oscar has gone, and the cleaner has been and let herself back out.

I don't want to allow my thoughts to plague me, but I worry that my past has caught up with me. I keep busy checking perfume samples, and I send an email to Norma, who I'm looking to collaborate with. I head to bed early, conscious I have a casting in the morning.

Chapter Six

My next few days follow the same exhausting pattern. I barely have time to blink. I've had no further experiences with feeling as though I'm being followed, but I have ensured to keep a low profile just in case.

"You're just being paranoid," I mutter to myself as I head out of Selfridges and make it to my car unscathed. My drive is quiet, and as soon as I get home, I rush inside. I just want to lock myself away and regroup because I feel so out of step at the minute, and it's playing havoc with my mind. I jog up the stairs and drop all my shopping bags against the ottoman in my dressing room with a tired sigh. I've worn myself out with shopping, buying enough new clothes to send Oscar into a frenzy. I change quickly into my favourite boy shorts and camisole before I head downstairs. There is a heap of things I could be doing, but I favour a night on the sofa. I walk into the living room and stop dead. Callan Scott is sitting calmly in my armchair—his knuckles white where he grips the armrests. Our eyes clash in an explosion of confusion, concern, and amusement. I'm so shocked that I hadn't seen the carefully placed gun on the armrest. Swallowing, I stare at him, worry etched on my face, but his gaze glitters in response. He's enjoying this.

"Come here." His murmur sends anxiety to spatter over my skin.

"How did you get in here?" I whisper, looking to see if the window is off the latch.

"That's irrelevant. Come here, Zara." I close my eyes and take a deep, steadying breath before walking slowly to him. He doesn't move. His gaze is riveted on my bare skin, and when I finally get to him, my legs are shaking, and my feet trudge like they are in quicksand. Every step feels like fifty, and my heart is showcasing the same exertion.

"I—"

"Don't speak. Kneel." His stiff finger points to the ground at his feet. His chin juts out, eyes daring me to defy. Kneel? The absolute cheek!

“Excuse me!” I splutter. His big frame fills my chair, making it look fragile and rickety, and the suit he is wearing is William Westmancott. I recognise it a mile off. This man is rolling in cash and apparently rolling in through my door uninvited.

“You heard. Don’t test me,” he warns in a deep tone. Clenching my fists, I slowly lower myself down onto my knees. I’m not graceful. I’m shaking too damn much, and he knows it. I have no doubt in my mind he’s been the cause of my unease all week and that he is the one who has been following me. It’s enough to spark my anger, and I refuse to cower. I hold his stare, my chin lifting with defiance. A small cruel smile pulls at his lips, and he slowly relaxes back into the armchair, making it creak loudly. His breath stutters out on a long, heady exhale, and then silence settles through the house.

I don’t know how much time has passed, whether it’s been ten minutes or an hour. I can’t move, and I daren’t speak, but I refuse to baulk at his sharp gaze. Callan has run his eyes over my body time and time again. His hands and thighs are tightening and relaxing at irregular intervals, and his breathing is as short and ragged as my own. When his eyes hit low, his brows knit together, and he clears his throat gently. My legs are quivering, and each hair is standing to attention all for him. His big body, those black as night eyes, and the rich, woody aftershave is intoxicating my house. He’s a force, a big, commanding bear of a man, and my lonely little body is soaking up his attention. I’m feeling things I’ve never felt before. My own hands tighten in my lap, and his gaze finally finds my face. By the time he stands, and he does it with such fluid aggression that I gasp, my heart is ready to fly out of my chest. After a beat, nothing happens, and I dare to look up. I’m face to face with his groin area, and I can’t help but notice how aroused he is. Swallowing, I shake my hair out and find icy cold irises staring down at me.

“Is that supposed to be my reward for being such a good girl?” I sneer, my stomach dizzy with butterflies. I have no idea what is happening between this man and me, but I have never experienced the level of cell-deep intensity I have when I am around him. I feel noticed. Truly recognised. Alive. It’s both terrifying and intoxicating for very concerning reasons. This man is dangerous.

“No.” His voice is gruff.

“So what was that, if not foreplay?” I rock back on my knees; my eyebrow lifted pointedly at him. I know my camisole has lifted. I can feel the cool air around my navel and his eyes zone in there. I tug at the hem and grit my teeth, a blush working its way up my neck. “What the hell do you want, Callan?” I snap.

Something about Callan Scott, as intimidating and tough as he is, pulls at a side of me I don't recognise. My guard, that I have kept up all these years, has dropped as quickly as I'm ready to drop my knickers for him. The realisation leaves me astonished. My ears begin to ring, and my limbs become heavy. Holy shit. I'm actually attracted to this beast of a man. I look at him in confused fascination. All those years of me running from a past are pointless in the face of this beautifully cruel man. He is fear. Whatever I was hiding from before was a mere joke compared to him.

He drops to a crouch, and it takes years of experience not to let myself recoil in front of him, as even lowered, he is a head taller than me. He tips my chin, and those marble eyes give my face a thorough once over, and my mind flashes with images of him unsuited.

“So he told you my name?” Shit.

I want to point out that he has my address, and what is more, he felt he could let himself in, but he shocks me further by saying, “I like my women pliant.” I can't help it—my face scrunches up because I'm so far removed from pliant around him, it's laughable. He chuckles. “I know,” he adds, frowning deeply and staring at my lips. “So why am I here?” I wanted to ask him the same thing. Excitement flutters around my stomach. His thumb rubs down my cheek to tug my lip, and my tongue, the sneaky devil, dips out and almost catches his digit. He tuts, and I press my lips together. “You intrigue me, Zara Reid, and I can't work out whether that is a good or bad thing.”

I stare up at him and sigh heavily. Intrigued, but not attracted. I'm disappointed, but I fight the impulse to let it show and stop my mouth from turning down.

“May I speak?”

My brow hitches up, and he nods, fighting a smile at my mocking tone.

“You're the one with a gun,” I say slowly, “not to mention you broke into my home.” I hate that he is in here. His fingers around my face must feel my swallow. “If anyone is bad here...” I leave my sentence to fall away.

“It's a nice place, a little too Hollywood for my tastes.”

I scoff as he stands and runs his palms together, then slides them into his trouser pockets.

“In that case, feel free to let yourself out.” I stand, bringing myself to my full height, but I’m no match for him.

“And there's the problem. I’m not ready to stop looking at you yet,” he admits, bemused. I frown heavily at him. What is his game? He is the most peculiar and staggering man I’ve ever come across.

“I have a copy of Vogue you can borrow.” I smirk, finding this mysterious man all the more alluring by the second. I’ve spent years being looked at, but none have ever looked at me the way this man does.

“I don't want Vogue. I want you.” His down-turned face is less than inches from my own when he delivers that rough confession. I suck in a low breath, my eyes vividly searching his. “Until next time, Zara,” he says. Before I can respond, he side-steps, moving past me. I look over my shoulder, and he’s there, watching me once more.

“Goodnight, Callan,” I whisper. His eyes make a lazy trail down to my toes pressed into the carpet. I stay stone still until the door clicks shut with a softness that contradicts his persona. I softly walk to the window and peer through the slatted blinds. Wide shoulders duck into the rainy street, where a car now idles in the middle of the road, a monstrosity of a thing, all matte black and painfully conspicuous. Callan slides into the back, and I hear the door thud shut. I sigh loudly and close the blind aggressively, shutting him out of my view. A pointless feat, seeing as the man broke his way in here and can get back in just as easily.

I spin away from the window with a disbelieving laugh. What the hell was that?

Fuck, if Callan Scott can find my address and sneak his way into my home, who else can? I shudder, thinking of *them*, but remind myself it’s too big a risk for them to reveal themselves to the world. If they wanted to harm me, they would have done it by now. They are biding their time, waiting for me to fall off my pedestal. The minute the world decides I’m no longer worthy of their attention, they will strike. I grip my throat and drop down into the chair, taking no comfort from how warm it still is.

I spend the rest of the evening searching for Callan Scott online, but other than finding out he is the owner of a club called Nexo and another called Hex, there is no information about him, not even an image. Groaning in frustration, I throw my phone down after my excessive search for Skyn

leaves me still guessing. Any link I believed to be related to him was either a dead end or denied me access.

“Exclusive gentlemen’s club,” I mock, dropping back in the chair, pissed off that he seems to know a far sight more about me than I do him. I grab a shower and head to bed, ignoring the pent up weight in my groin.

~

The following morning, I do some yoga, then grab a shake before heading out the door to meet Oscar for lunch. I'm almost at the restaurant when he flies down the road in a new sports car.

“What’s up?” I panic. Where the hell did he get this car?

“Paps, get in. I've called ahead to Firehouse.” I don’t question him. I’m grateful and slide in, looking back at the lone photographer frantically trying to pack his gear away to follow us. “I think an employee contacted them. As soon as they saw me and the false name, they must have clicked.”

“Oh, but I love it there,” I huff.

“Me too, twats,” he spits and zips through the traffic. I look back and freeze when I see the huge blacked-out car tanking it behind us a few cars back. Callan.

“You okay?” Oscar wonders.

“Yes. Firehouse is fab, plus you love their cocktails.” I waft my hand, trying to dispel the feeling of excitement rushing around my body. “New car?”

“Liquid lunch? Hell yes,” he chortles. “Felt I was due an upgrade,” he says with a wide grin. He goes quiet before saying hesitantly, “By the way, I had to swing by Skyn last night, and we're all good.” He blows out a few days’ worth of worry.

My eyes pique with interest, and Oscar groans. “Z, no, I mean it. The man is fucking scary,” he says heatedly.

I fiddle with my hair. “I know. It’s just so odd there is nothing on him other than these two clubs. Why not mention this Skyn place?” I aim for indifference, but Oscar gawks at me.

“Why are you looking him up?” His fingers flex nervously on the wheel, but I give him my hardest stare. I’m not letting this go. I’m like a dog with a bone. Grinding his teeth, Oscar reluctantly opens up to me. “It’s invite only. Callan only has who he wants in his club.”

“He's a bit of a ghost,” I comment.

“Like you.” He frowns, finding some unwanted similarity between Callan and me.

“I’m on every other billboard,” I drawl. Callan and I are nothing alike.

“Yes, but no one knows the real you or anything about you. You’re an enigma. Other than your raging sex appeal, it’s the next best thing about you.” He laughs, shifting the tense atmosphere in his new vintage car as he sighs and looks pleadingly at me. “Please let it go. He’s dangerous.”

“I can’t,” I whisper, side-eyeing him.

“Why the fuck not?”

“Well, for starters, he was in my apartment when I got home last night,” I admit shakily. Oscar’s face drops and pales. I refrain from telling him about our little staring competition.

“Oh shit, Zara,” he curses long and hard, his fist slams into the wheel, and the horn blares. “This is all my fucking fault,” he huffs dramatically, “wait, you said for starters, what else?” His eyes are wide, looking all over me and back to the road.

“Secondly, he’s following us.” I scratch my nose, my eyes slipping to the wing mirror where the matte black tank purrs along behind us.

“What? Shit!” He swerves before dragging the car back under control. He checks the mirror, sweat forming on his brow. He is terrified of Callan.

I lay a hand over his knuckle-white one.

“Calm down, just drive to Firehouse, and if he comes in, I’ll deal with it,” I tell him softly.

“Oh yeah, sure, let’s deal with the most psychotic fucker in London,” he scoffs. “I’m going to need a barrel of Mojitos after this,” he declares, checking his mirror far more than before. By the time we get inside, get seated and have ordered, Oscar is a nervous wreck. Unlike Oscar, I can’t help but feel a flush of heat at knowing Callan is a windowpane away. He doesn’t come in, but his car sits outside. Is he watching me again?

“What did he want?” Oscar grumbles, pushing his food around his plate. I eye him critically. Is he for real?

“He has women. Why can’t he have them?” he mutters, rubbing his forehead. Oscar’s words penetrate my mind like knives. Of course he has women, I know that, but hearing it makes me feel things I don’t wish to acknowledge. I tilt my head and stare at the car, wondering what is going through Callan’s head.

“You’re not jealous, are you?” I laugh, popping a bite into my mouth. The flavours burst on my tongue, and I moan in appreciation. I look at Oscar, who is scowling at me. It has always just been the two of us. Is he worried I will replace him? I convey as much in my look.

“Very funny, and no, I’m worried for you. Why didn't you stay in the car?” He sighs. His frown is heavy, and his eyes sad. I’m not sure I can sit here much longer watching my friend squirm.

“I didn’t, okay.” I can’t go back and change that, and I’m not even sure that I would now. Guilt fills me. Oscar’s still pretty banged up. What the hell is wrong with me? “How long have you been swinging by there for? When did you get an invite?” I ask, my eyes skim to the window, but I refuse to keep them there.

“I didn't. Like I said, my cousin works for him. I dropped some stuff off,” he mutters, growing impatient with my constant need to pick for information. Oscar angles himself away from the window.

“What kind of stuff?” *So he does know what was in the package.*

“Stuff you don’t need to know about, stop digging, Zara.” His fingers grip around his cutlery, and I huff back in my seat. “I don't really want to be discussing it with Killer Callan over the road.”

I sit straight in my chair and gawp at my friend.

“Killer Callan?”

“It was a joke. The bloke is scary, and I don't fancy another Callan-induced concussion, okay, so can we discuss something else?” My gaze juts to the car a few feet away, and without hesitation, I stand and walk to the entrance and out onto the path. I ignore Oscar gaping at me through the window and walk to the car, knocking on the tinted glass. It slowly lowers but stops as soon as a pair of sunglasses comes into view. Stalin, I’m guessing. I never did meet him at the hospital, even though clothes and shoes appeared for me. He gives a subtle nod towards the back as I hear the door unlock.

I swing the back door open and get in, finding Callan sitting lounging in the back, a partition glass hiding us from the driver.

"You're following me?" I say, closing the door with a loud thud.

“You’re astute.” For a moment, I worry that the car will pull off, taking me with them, but it doesn’t.

“Why?” I ask. He laughs and motions for me to get closer. I’m as close as can be. The back seats are roomy, but other than climbing on his lap,

we're pretty close. I sidle closer, but it isn't good enough. Callan takes my wrist and encourages me over the central barrier. I'm panting already. My eyes flash to his satisfied ones. I'm tugged until I'm kneeling over his lap. He takes my hands and holds them in place behind my back with one of his own much larger hands. The position forces my breasts forward, and with a smirking tilt of his head, he lowers his mouth to my exposed collarbone. His lips don't touch, but I can feel his breath and the heat of his close proximity. Holy shit, I came here to give him a piece of my mind, how quick the tables have turned. I'm practically hyperventilating in his lap. I squirm.

"Tell me, Zara," his mouth moves up, bringing his lips to my ear, "how many hours did you spend thinking about me fucking you last night?" My eyes slam shut.

I moan, my thighs stiffen, and it causes me to rub against him. He grunts, and butterflies swirl and burst in my stomach. I've never felt anything like this heat. My neck is tilted, and my eyes are closed.

"Kiss me," I plead. His mouth looks incredible.

"I don't do personal." He nudges my ear. "Can you handle that? I only look at a woman once. If I take you, and I will, I'll take you once. You won't see or hear from me again," he tells me bluntly.

Only looks at a woman once like he looked at me last night? He is prolonging the inevitable. Knowing he has shared that same intimate interaction with other women and not just me rattles my cage more than I care to admit. I was stupid to think I'd shaken the sensible out of this man—not that he even has a speck of sensibility in him. No, Callan Scott is a ticking bomb. I believe he can perfect the most calculated of actions, only to shock others by stunning them with his unpredictability. He's an enigma.

"Can you handle that, Zara?" My eyes search his. It's the perfect proposition. I smile slowly and drop my head back as his mouth trails a breath width from my skin. We orbit around each other until he is at my other ear. I feel electric.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I reply with as much conviction as him. He drops my hands and clasps my arse, lifting me from his stationary position to deposit me in the other back seat. I blink, shocked by his sudden change.

"Stalin will collect you when I want you," he tells me. As soon as the words are delivered, my back stiffens, and my jaw sets. What a prick.

He just lost me. I don't mess with men, period. I don't date or fool around despite what the media writes about me, and they would be shocked to find I'm painfully inexperienced. I was willing to curb those rules for a little fun with this guy. Respectful fun. I was even going to play along and be all pliant and willing. His gaze is on his phone, and his abrupt dismissal makes me dislike him. Arrogant twat.

I get out and stand at the door.

"Callan?" His eyes lift slowly, but his mind is still lost in his phone. "Let's just pretend we fucked, and I'll take the no seeing or hearing from now on." Confusion registers on his face, but it's quickly replaced by anger. "Take care," I spit, shutting the door on his heavy scowl.

Chapter Seven

When I head back inside, Oscar is looking green around the gills.

“What the fuck just happened?” he whisper-shouts as the car speeds off with a squeal.

I shrug.

“I told him to politely fuck off.” I smile and lift my tonic water, taking a big sip.

When I look up, Oscar’s mouth is agape, and his own drink spills out unattractively down his chin. I pull a face, and he quickly mops it up.

“Fuck, Zara. This is Callan fucking Scott. He is like one of London’s bigges—” He stops dead, catching himself.

“Biggest what? Twat? News flash, I already know.” The waitress arrives to clear the table, so we stay quiet, and Oscar drops his elbows on the table, his head in his hands, waiting for us to be alone once more.

“The guy has a gun. Aren’t you a little bit worried that he might use it?” He looks up from his position of despair.

“If he wanted me dead, I’d be dead,” I say. I’ve stared death in the face, and I do not believe Callan is just biding his time before he pulls the plug. I don’t think he wants to hurt me.

“There’s still time,” he mutters roughly.

“Gee, thanks!” I laugh loudly, drawing a few looks our way.

“You don’t tell Callan Scott shit. No one tells him shit. Callan tells you.” He points at me and leans back on a pained huff. “Do you think I want to be involved with him? I wasn’t there by choice, Zara,” he grates out, conveying his disbelief at my blasé attitude towards the big man.

“Why were you there then?” I snap, my eyes flashing angrily at him.

“I can’t tell you,” he whispers regretfully as he pats the table dry, looking everywhere but at me.

“So now we’re keeping secrets.” I ignore the big dirty secret I have been keeping from everyone when it flashes to the forefront of my mind, making me feel queasy.

“I’m keeping you safe,” he snaps, looking at me with as much hurt as I’m feeling at the wall he is holding up between us.

“I met the lunatic. I’d say we’re past that now, Oscar.”

“Z, just be accommodating, and he’ll back off.”

“He wants sex,” I mutter whilst he looks pained on the other side of the table. “What else did you think he wanted?” I voice my confusion.

“No, I gathered he was attracted to you,” he rubs his forehead and sighs, “but Callan doesn’t do high risk—he goes for minimal fallout. You’re a well-known model, and he’s explicitly private.” When his eyes hold mine, I know he is referring to me also. I’m just as closed off, and sometimes the media’s lies assist in allowing the real me to be shielded away. “He has the restraint of a nun. You’re everything he stays away from. I don’t get it?” He swallows loudly, his mind frantically trying to fathom the inner workings of Callan Scott.

“I don’t think he does either,” I say honestly.

“How are you so calm?”

“Because you won’t tell me anything. He’s just a man,” I say, just like I have done my entire adult life. With *them*, with myself, I have disassociated myself with the reality of the situation.

Oscar scoffs and throws a few notes on the table to pay.

“Yeah, well, it was ‘just a man’ that had you fleeing last time—only difference is, this one has a gun.” Oscar doesn’t know the truth of it. He thinks I fled a bad relationship. He has no idea Callan isn’t the first dangerous man I’ve crossed paths with.

Men, I think sourly. A gang. Most would have gone into hiding, and for a short while, I did, only it’s hard to hide in the shadows when they own them. When the opportunity rose to make a name for myself, I shunned it until I realised popularity was probably what I needed to keep myself safe. My issue now is that I’m too well known to ever walk away. I know when my time is up, it won’t be from natural causes. I won’t slip away in my sleep. I know my death will be cruel. I just hope it’s quick.

I’m silent the whole way home. As soon as we pull up outside mine, I look to my friend.

“Look, you said he is okay with you. Let me worry about me. He’s gone,” I say, the fading bruises over his face reminding me why I shouldn’t be getting involved with this man, and I know I shouldn’t, but I’ve never felt this way. Not ever.

Work and being on set with Georgie keeps me occupied enough that I don't think much about Callan, not until I'm heading home each evening and my heart kicks up because I want him to be there, like before, lying in wait for me. He did say Stalin would be in touch, but that was before I told him I wasn't interested. Which is a good thing. Nothing good can come from this. I know that. Oscar is adamant about that fact, and he has told me time and time again that Callan will have no qualms about hurting me. I suspect he means physically, but I know differently. That time in his office when he thought he had hurt me showed me that below that dark foreboding exterior is a man who is as misunderstood as I am. I imagine everyone thinks they know Callan as much as they think they know me. The truth is, I'm who they want me to be, not who I am. I suspect it's the same for him, too. It's not just the attraction. I feel this connection to him, like some force in him recognised the same fibres in me, and it reached out, pulling something from myself until it intertwined. I feel safe, and that's far scarier than any emotion I've ever experienced.

I'm checking the video over with Georgie when Oscar saunters in, dressed to the nines in a leather jacket and bespoke loafers. I must look confused, and he shakes his head.

"You forgot, drinks?" he asks. Oh, bugger!

"But she doesn't drink," Georgie pipes up, his eyes rolling all over the screen and never once finding Oscar's. He's avoiding looking at him, and for good reason.

"Yes, well, she is the nought point one percent of the population that doesn't need to drink to feel even marginally superior," Oscar jokes.

"Well, if I looked like her, I wouldn't either," Georgie laughs. "I love it," he says, referring to the video we've just shot.

"Oh, can I see?" Oscar drops his arse on the desk, and Georgie grabs his laptop, holding it still.

"No, it needs tweaking." Georgie shuts the lid and stands, grabbing his coat.

"You said you loved it." Oscar sounds petulant. He flicks a small paper note on the floor, and Georgie huffs, picking it up. I eye my friend over Georgie's head as he bends to pick the paper up. Oscar holds his hands just

short of the guy's hair and thrusts his hips. I slap his arms, mouthing, 'Stop it!'

"What's going on?" Georgie snaps, staring at Oscar.

"Jeez, para much, come on, show me the video, and let me snap a still for Zara's social media. Her fans will go wild. Everyone will want to know who the elusive Georgie Blare is."

"They know who I am," he snaps. "Well, Oscar, it was nice seeing you as always." I press my lips together, and Oscar winks at the older man. I know for a fact Georgie has got a hard-on for my friend. Oscar, although not fussed about the director's affections, loves to wind him up.

"Naturally." He smiles slowly. Georgie goes red up the neck, and I feel sorry for him. Oscar flicks a look at me. "Ready, Z? I have a date unless you're free?" he asks Georgie, who goes beetroot.

"Goodbye, Zara. Oscar," Georgie says diplomatically.

"Oh, don't be like that. She knows you bat both ways." Oscar's hips rock side to side as he sniggers. Georgie says nothing and air kisses my cheek before packing his laptop away and leaving me to watch Oscar fall all over the desk.

"That was mean."

"But funny," he chortles. "Oh, come on, Zara, the guy tried to feel me up once. It's only fair I make him feel uncomfortable back. Anyway, I'm in a naughty mood, don't piss on my fun." He winks.

"I need to change. Can we stop by mine?" I say, grabbing my things together. Everyone else is long gone, so just Oscar and I remain in the big space, and the backdrop makes the room seem endless, like a cloud hovering in the background.

"I knew I should have called you this morning." Oscar tuts.

"In that case, I no longer feel bad, as you should have," I reply, turning the lights off.

Oscar helps me load things into his car, then we are cruising back to mine.

"I cannot wait to just hit the bars and dance with my favourite girl." His grin is wide, the twinkle in his eye infectious.

"I give it three hours before you disappear on me," I say with a chuckle. It wouldn't be the first time he'd picked up a date and left me. Oscar gives a filthy laugh, which is cut off by the car phone ringing. His shoulders droop

as soon as he sees it's his mother. I give him a small smile and brace myself for when he connects the call.

"He left me!" Her wail fills the car. Oscar's fingers turn white on the wheel, and I try to ignore how red in the face he is looking. "He... Oh god. He's gone." Another wail rolls through the interior, and I bite my lip at the pain in her voice. "I'm going to die alone," she sobs uncontrollably. There is no denying she is drunk. Her words are slurred and thick. Both Oscar and I have become accustomed to Anita's meltdowns, but I feel for Oscar, his once confident but spoilt mother has lost herself to the booze. I constantly remind Oscar it's grief, but his mother refuses to get help, and Oscar is forever picking up the pieces.

"You will not die alone. You have me, mother," Oscar says softly.

"You hate me!" she stutters.

"I do not hate you. I love you. You're just lost. I'm coming home. No more drink!"

"I'm sorry," she whispers. I throw my friend a sympathetic look. The call cuts and Oscar gives a deep sigh.

"Let me just go and settle her, then I will pick you up?" he says, not really looking at me. I think he is a little embarrassed about his mother, but he loves her dearly, and this is breaking his heart. I reach over and squeeze his hand. He throws me a wan smile.

Oscar drops me out front. I quickly grab my bits from the boot and go back to the window.

"I'll see you in a bit."

"I'll be an hour, two at the most," he assures me.

Now that Oscar is heading back to his mother's, I decide to grab a shower and freshen up. I feel worn out after today, plus I can make some food to give me a boost. I drop all my bags in the hall with a clatter and head up the stairs with intent, mentally planning my outfit as I go. I push into my bedroom and stop dead. Callan is sitting at the bottom of my bed. His legs are placed firmly apart, his suit trousers pulling under the tension being placed on them. He shifts, bringing his hand round where I see my silk nightgown scrunched up in his grasp. His eyes shift from me to the cream silk, and he lifts it, brings it to his face and inhales. His eyes roll shut, and I'm witnessing this big, commanding man sniffing my nightwear. If any other man did that, I would call them out for being a sex pest, but

with him, Callan, I can only watch and absorb the same sort of euphoria he seems to be experiencing.

He looks to me, then the spot between his thighs. I know what he wants. He need not ask. His unspoken question is as loud as his tattoos. I oblige with little thought, gravity pulling me to him. I walk with quiet purpose until I'm at his feet, then I'm on my knees, face twisted to hold that cool gaze.

We don't speak. Only this time, Callan leans forwards, resting himself on his knees, bringing himself closer to me. His breath floats out over my face, and my lashes flutter as a result. Time slows and slips away all at once. I'm back in that space again. The world ceases to exist, and for a fraction of time, I'm free from a world of hurt. Free from previous pain. Free from the restraints of life. I no longer can think, only feel, and it's all because this man cannot take his eyes from me. He views me as a rare heirloom. Precious. To be protected. Safe.

My breath stutters out, and Callan shifts on the edge of my bed.

"You look tired," he says gently, eyes sweeping over my face.

"I've had a long day." He nods in understanding and stands swiftly, side-stepping me and heading into my en-suite. I twist, watching him over my shoulder. The last thing I expect is for him to run me a bath. I rise slowly and walk through to watch him. "Is that so you can drown me?" I lean into the doorframe, taking an odd amount of satisfaction at seeing his big, burly body doing such a domestic task.

His laugh is light but genuine.

"No, I have work to do. I'll see you soon," he says, walking past me. I frown at him, not able to fathom his plans for me. How much longer does he intend for this staring game to go on for?

"So you can stare at me again?" I muse, watching his wide frame exit the walk-in to my room.

"Yes. Get some rest." He doesn't turn back, just leaves, so I'm left alone in my big townhouse.

I sink into the bubbly water and rest my head back. Callan. Callan. Callan. I say the name over and over in my mind, trying it out. It's such an unusual name. A strong name. I like it. My fascination with him should concern me, but for now, I just float around with it. It's an intoxicating change from constantly being on edge. I know he is someone to be feared, yet I have found myself feeling more relaxed in his company than I have

ever before. *The way he looked at me.* I huff out a shocked sigh, and the hairs over my skin prickle until they are standing up. Never have I been in someone's company where their sole purpose was to just look at me. Most people want something from me, some insight or some recognition, and I know that Callan wants something, but for now, this heightened intensity I'm enduring, all because of his black-as-night stare, is the calmest I've felt in a long while. It's refreshing.

Chapter Eight

Oscar and I move around the bar. He is more than tipsy, and we have danced our way through song after song. I think we both needed this night out, me more so than I realised. Masego comes on, and Oscar grabs himself a shot and me a soft drink. I suggest we move to the dance floor, where we can move a bit better.

He sings to me, rocking his way along the floor before he necks his shot. He grabs my hand and spins me out. We're both laughing when he tugs me to him and says into my ear, "Oh, brunette in the gold dress." I'm flung out before I can answer. I see her, though. I know it won't be long before I'm on my way home, and Oscar is no doubt trying to get her out of her knickers.

Twenty minutes later, and he is over at the bar kissing the brunette. I nip to the ladies and freshen up, ordering an Uber whilst I'm at it.

"Holy shit, you're Zara Reid!" I twist, finding a room full of women now staring at me. The one girl who noticed me knocks into the sink and blinks at me. "Zara Reid. Hi!" She stumbles and falls into me.

"Hi, having a good night?" I ask, smiling at her drunkenness.

"I am so sorry." She is slurring, squinting, and I find it oddly endearing.

"No need to apologise."

"Yes, best night. I can't believe you're in here." She spins around. "See, I told you, Nina, this is the place to be." Nina rushes over, apologetic.

"I'm sorry, she's so drunk."

"I am nooooot!" The girl stumbles back into me, and I hold her up, her head on my shoulder. She looks back at me. "Selfie pleeeeeease?"

I grin and say, "Sure." I turn her and wipe under her eyes and re-fluff her hair. She is glassy-eyed, but at least she doesn't look bedraggled. She smiles at me. I know she will be pissed off if she looks a mess in the photo. Her friend looks at me, unsure.

"Honestly, it's fine," I say. She holds the camera up, and I point at it, encouraging her friend to look there with me, and we both smile as a few

snaps are taken.

“Thank you so much,” the girl shouts happily. I see a few other girls looking at me expectantly and, one by one, I take a multitude of selfies with them all under the agreement that my location isn’t shared. It’s only when I get a notification off my Uber that I’m able to pull away.

~

I find my ride quickly and settle in. I didn't see Oscar on my way back through the club, and I suspect he is already on his way to the brunette's. No doubt I will be asked to go and save him in the morning. I send him a quick message to let him know I'm heading home and to check in with me as soon as he can. The traffic is fairly heavy, and due to road closures, we are diverted through several side streets. I check my phone to see if Oscar has come back when the car comes to a sudden halt. I jolt forwards, grabbing the belt when it pinches my neck.

“Bloody hell!” I cough, looking up out the front window. Callan is standing in the middle of the road, with his big car haphazardly blocking the street. *You have got to be kidding me!* “Here is fine,” I say when the driver begins to reverse. I don’t allow him time to question me.

I step out as soon as he stops and thank him quickly. His eyes go from me to Callan; luckily he doesn't seem to recognise me. As soon as I'm free of the car, I look up the road and glare at Callan. He really is a psycho. I walk up the road towards him, but rather than acknowledge him, I walk right on by, ignoring his scoff. I'm barely past the bonnet when a spade of a hand scoops me up and pulls me back. “Didn't peg you as a stalker. I'm not getting in the car with you!” I snap, throwing angry daggers over my shoulder at him.

“Now, now, is there any need to be so rude?” He grins, pushing me flush to the car, his hand spanning my waist and holding me still. I search his gaze. What does this man want? Why all the games? “Why leave the car if not to get in mine.”

“You would have followed me home.” I jut my chin at him, all the while wondering what it is that makes this man tick, the driving force behind his thoughts, his needs. Why is this man so alarmingly interesting?

“I would. So let's quit the childish antics. Get in the car, Zara.” He steps back, pulls the door open and waits for me. I debate my options. Either way, he will follow me, whether he slowly crawls along beside me, drawing

attention as I walk home, or chases my Uber. He will follow me. Grinding my teeth, I hop in and snatch the door, slamming it shut before he can close it. He eyes me heatedly through the glass, despite not being able to see me, before walking around the bonnet, his eyes fixed on mine. I keep my chin high and eyes forward when he gets in.

“That wasn’t necessary,” he growls. Maybe not, but it pissed him off and, in turn, satisfied me.

We sit in silence for the first half of the journey. I keep my face averted and studiously ignore the spicy scent of his aftershave. It’s different tonight, more sensual, and I start to wonder who he has worn it for. Gritting my teeth, I mentally shout at myself for caring and refused to notice how devilishly handsome he is with his black suit and open neck black shirt.

“So he left you again. I’m starting to lose a lot of respect for Mr Winters,” he says with a grimace.

“Oh, so you still had some after you beat him to a pulp?” I scoff, throwing him a scathing look. Callan smiles slowly. I scowl, not giving him any more satisfaction.

“I never laid a hand on Oscar.” He smiles darkly.

“You gave the order,” I spit. It’s the truth. I doubt his henchmen do anything without his go-ahead. I feel drained after today’s antics, and having to deal with Callan twice in one day is giving me a dull headache at the back of my skull. I rub the pain and stare out the window, waiting for him to pull up outside mine.

As soon as the engine cuts out, I push free from the car and walk quickly to my front door. Luckily, there are no paps, so they don’t witness the huge man stalking in behind me. I’m walking through the hall when I’m scooped up and held in his thick arms. My gasp is loud, and my hand snatches hold of his collar to keep me steady. Callan’s nostrils flare, and he stares at me for a moment before he begins to ascend the stairs.

“What are you doing?” I don’t adjust my hold, but to stop my head from bobbing, I lay it against his bicep. I bite my lip and force myself not to look up at him. “I have a headache. I wanted a painkiller,” I say as he walks me into my room.

“Where are they?” He hasn’t broken a sweat at all. He lowers me to my bed and nods for me to get in. “I will bring you some painkillers. You’re probably dehydrated. Alcohol will do that to you,” he says gruffly.

“I don’t drink,” I admit, seeing his eyes flare slightly. He leans in, and I know he is trying to smell whether my breath proves me wrong and him right. I try not to laugh. He is absolutely the most peculiar and alluring man.

“Where are the tablets?”

“Down in the kitchen—first cupboard on the right,” I say, sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for him to leave me. As soon as he does, I quickly undress and pull a clean set of nightwear on—another silk camisole set. I can’t bring myself to wear the nightdress after he so brazenly sniffed it. When Callan returns, I’m removing my makeup and don’t look as defined as I did when he plucked me from the streets like a cheap whore. The thought makes my mouth sour. Is that what he thinks I am?

“I prefer you without all that shit on.” He is right behind me. My eyes flash at his backhanded compliment. I keep my face down and wash the remnants off before patting my face dry and moisturising. My en-suite is big, but with him in here, it morphs into a box.

“Shame then that it’s none of your business what I wear,” I quip. The glass clinks at my side, and Callan plants his free hands on either side of me, locking me in.

“Shame that you care what I think,” he says, low and rough. My eyes snap to him because his confession did make my stomach flip.

“Why are you here, Callan?” I ask, collecting up the tablets and taking a swig of water. He is watching me through the mirror like my personal conscience.

“Why have you got a headache?” His hand comes up and presses to my forehead. I am in no way admitting to him that I find him too much.

“I’m tired.” It’s as good as the truth.

“Yet you went out,” he comments. His chin slides over my shoulder. It’s rough, and the prickles make me shiver. His night-black eyes sparkle, and I square my shoulders to move him away.

“Am I under curfew?” My brow lifts high, and we contemplate each other for a moment.

“Not at all. I just thought you’d take better care of yourself.” He shifts and grips my hip, making me jump. “Bed,” he demands. I go stiff as a board and cross my arms over my chest.

“I’m not sleeping with you!” I scoff, storming past him and yanking the covers up. A deep laugh reverberates through my room.

“Like I said, I’m not done looking at you yet,” he growls, following me over and taking the quilt. He grips my ankles in one hand and swings my feet up so I’m laying down.

He leans down, his hand hitting the space on the mattress beneath my thighs, so close but not touching, and my eyes fly to his as his other hand is placed beside my head. He leans in closely so he is at my ear.

“I will keep looking at you as long as I like because you like it too, Zara. And, when the time comes, I will look over every inch of this body, taste it, touch it. Are you going to be ready for me, Zara?” His lips are on my earlobe, and I shudder, slamming my eyes shut. Am I ready for him? Am I ready to let this end?

He said once he has me that I will never see him again. It’s what I should want, but I know the second I cross that line with this man, I will be stuck over the line with no Callan in sight. I swallow thickly, pressing back into the pillow as his nose dances along my chin.

“God, I want to taste you,” he growls, anger lacing his words. His hand grips my chin, and he stares at me. “I won’t, but when I do, I will savour you for as long as the night lasts. Get some rest.” He stands fluidly, and I watch him with my mouth parted. What in the holy hotness just happened? “Goodnight, Zara.”

“Goodnight, Callan.”

He winks silently, wishing me sweet dreams. I have the strangest notion to tell him I’m flying out of the country in two weeks, but I don’t. I wish I were going tomorrow. I need a few days to really come to terms with whatever this thing is with Callan. I try not to dwell on the fact that Mr Dark and Deadly ran me a bath hours earlier and escorted me home and put me to bed. I certainly don’t want to focus on how human it made him seem. I need to keep my wits about me. I have to. Men like Callan attack at the most unlikely moments. At least a few days away out of London will give me a moment to breathe. I need to clear my headspace. I’m craving it. I can’t wait to be on the other side of the world, alone, and to relax once I’ve finished my shoot. I’m wishing the weeks away just to give myself time to think.



As expected, Oscar calls me early, and I’m cruising through London until I’m parking outside a block of flats. I send him a quick text to let him

know I'm out the front and five minutes later he emerges looking less put together than me and thoroughly ruffled. I suppress my smile and unlock the door for him to get in.

"Morning, there is a jacket in the back for you and some different shoes. We're going shopping," I tell him.

Oscar's head hits the seat rest with a loud thud.

"Z, I am hanging. I need food before I even think about entering any stores," he whines, rubbing his forehead. "God, I feel rough." He looks peaky as hell. More fool him, I think, giving him a raised brow. I have no sympathy.

"I knew you were going to say that, so I made you a hot sarnie and in the glove compartment are some painkillers." I reach behind his seat and hand him some water and his sandwich.

"And the award for the most amazing friend goes to Zara Reid." He takes a hearty bite and groans. "Wow," he says with a mouth full, his eyes rolling all over the place. "I could do with a shower." He grimaces.

"What's wrong with hers?" I nod towards the flats as I pull into the road and flick the radio on. He's done it before—why not today?

"Her name is Chloe. I think I might actually see her again," he comments, side-eyeing me.

"What, really? Oscar, that's great." I grin. This is such good news. He never sticks it out with a woman—it's always one-night-stand after another. It can't be good for him.

"Yeah, we really hit it off, and the sex was pretty damn good too." He chuckles, sinking his teeth into bread and sighing heartedly.

He looks a right state, hair messed, clothes shrivelled and smelling less than clean. I wrinkle my nose playfully, and he makes a middle finger around his sandwich.

"I'm so happy for you. If you really want a shower, we can swing by yours first?" He shakes his head and shrugs. He probably doesn't want to deal with his mother whilst he is in such a fragile state.

"So what are we shopping for?" he asks after he has swallowed his food.

"I need makeup, as I'm almost out of all my favourites. I've been sent samples, but honestly, I don't like them."

"In all fairness, what you have works for you. Your skin looks flawless," he comments around bites.

We hit the stores and spend most of the day looking at various cosmetic counters. I mill about, trying some new lipsticks, and I pick up a new highlighter. Once we have exhausted the makeup counters, we move over to the perfume section.

“Fancy getting some dinner?” Oscar asks. Placing a few glass bottles back, he picks up an aftershave and gives himself a quick spray, sniffing with satisfaction.

I begin pulling aftershave after aftershave down and sniffing at them. I don’t want to admit why I’m doing it, and I’m grateful Oscar is too hungover to notice, but I really want to know what aftershave Callan wears. He always smells so good. I place lid after lid on each bottle, trying to find the right one. I almost give up when I see a green Armani bottle, and as soon as I press the lid to my nose, I’m assaulted with Callan. Eau de cedre. It’s a scent I have become secretly obsessed with. I have no reason to buy this, but I have every intention of doing so.

“Sure, let me just pay for these.”



The next week is a rush of shoots, castings, and gigs, all due to Miranda’s organising, and I’m waiting on Georgie to send me the final draft video before we can release my perfume to retail. I’m not sure why I care so much because this life is a farce, but this is the first thing I have created myself, and I really want it to be perfect. I’m staring at my necklace in the mirror, my fingers twisting it around and around, and for a moment, I’m not Zara. I’m a twelve-year-old girl, innocent, naïve, and foolishly trusting. When my eyes open, tears threaten to fall. I won’t let them. I never do. How can I cry over a life that I never truly knew or understood?

I have the strongest urge to create my own jewellery. It’s the one thing, the only thing other than my own flesh and blood, that connects me to my true self. To him. I stare at my eyes. This necklace and my eyes are all I have of him. I want to make that count. Maybe I can make personal pieces that mean something to others like this necklace does for me? I’d trade it in a heartbeat to have my father back, but I know that will never be possible, and this is the next best thing. Before I can even allow my mind to run with it, I stop. I need to see my perfume through to the end, and once I have that in the bag, I will look into jewellery.

Chapter Nine

Pushing away from my dressing table, I tighten the tie on my wrap dress and slip my slippers on before heading downstairs. Some odd underlying sense that has recently developed due to a certain, big, imposing man being around ripples over me. He is here. My eyes dart quickly into the living room as I pass, but it's empty. He certainly wasn't upstairs. I move further into the house. Callan is sitting at the breakfast bar, and for the first time, I show no shock, nor do I pay him much mind. I eye him half-heartedly before grabbing a bowl and some ingredients to make myself some breakfast. For someone who confessed my house was far too Hollywood for his tastes, he sure as hell likes it here. I move about, adding things to a pan and chopping fruit to top my porridge with. I silently work, aware that I'm being watched—assessed.

“Not going to offer me any?” Callan's deep drawl breaks the silence. I restrain a smile as I put everything together and smack it down in front of Callan. The bowl cracks loudly against the marble worktop, and my aggressive attitude seems to amuse him somewhat. Those lush lips twist, his dark eyes sparkle, and it infuriates me to no end.

“Here you go, dear.” Sarcasm rolls around my tongue and slips out in the most satisfying way when his eyes widen at my endearment.

He is green around the gills.

“Less of that.” He adjusts his collar, and I almost laugh, knowing I've made him uncomfortable. Inside, I'm celebrating. “What is this you're eating?” he asks quickly. The spoon drops in the bowl with a plop, and he looks disgusted by the contents. Picky sod.

“You big baby, it's porridge with fruit and seeds. It's good for you,” I say, offended, tugging the bowl to take it from him and spooning some in my mouth. Callan's watching me fervently. “So what does one eat to be mountain-sized? Do you neck a cow at breakfast?” I joke. His shoulders are massive for starters, and those suits must be specially made for his frame.

Callan's laugh bounces around the kitchen. He drops his head on a shake and looks up through his lashes. My mouthful of porridge threatens to choke me. Holy shit, he is beyond gorgeous. Dropping my gaze, I stare into my bowl.

"No cows," he finally answers and yanks the bowl back, stealing the spoon from my hand and taking a scoop for himself. Slowly, the spoon disappears, and I see his tongue curve around the underside of the spoon before he pulls it away, leaving me gawking like a damn teen. He mulls the food over and nods at me. "It's good."

"I offered you a bowl. I don't share." I snatch the spoon back and stare at it, wondering if I should get a clean one. Callan seems intent on finding that out too, as he's smirking at me. I drop the spoon back in the bowl and eat another spoonful, and as soon as I swallow, I sit back in my seat. "What brings you here at this ungodly hour?" It's just past eight a.m., so hardly early, but he's never made an appearance in the morning before. I don't doubt he is an early riser. Callan is probably meticulous, organised, and routined.

"This is late. I've been up since five." Just as I suspected.

"I bet you have." I roll my eyes and continue with my breakfast. "Can I get you a drink?" I ask.

"You eat. Let me." He gets up and moves around like he has been in here before. I watch him both with horror and confusion as he retrieves two glasses and makes us both an ice-filled glass of water. He knows my home like the back of his hand.

"Do you let yourself into my home and snoop often?" I ask with a glare. My spoon hits my bowl with a loud crack. Just how many times has he been here pulling open drawers and cupboards and looking through my life? I think of all the times I have been out, been busy, leaving him with the opportunity to walk around freely.

"No, once was enough to remember." Totally unfazed, he takes the seat opposite me once more, and I have the sudden urge to scoop the porridge up and flick it at him.

"So I can't enter your club, but you can walk on up here and do what the hell you like!" Oh, I am so mad. It was never okay that he allowed himself in here, but the fact that he has taken it upon himself to snoop through my personal belongings is worse. I'm about to say as much but stop myself. Nothing in this house is personal to me, and he is expecting a meltdown, so

instead, I shrug my shoulders, swallowing my fury. “Whatever.” I sound petulant, young, and I imagine for once he can see our age difference. I am much younger than him. I have wondered countlessly about how old he is. Callan is far too formidable to be anything close to me in age. He is worldly, experienced, but not in any way like how I am; his life is on the cusp of every dark thought that has plagued me.

“How old are you?” I suddenly ask. I tuck my straight hair behind my ear and chew my lip, watching him back, trying not to seem hesitant and looking anything but.

“Thirty-six.” Wow. Thirteen years on me. I should possibly find that worrisome. Does he know how old I am? “Age doesn’t matter to me. We’re both consenting adults, Zara.”

I swallow the porridge. It’s thick in my throat.

“Some of those girls in your club looked pretty young,” I state sadly.

“They are all of age, and trust me when I say they have it far better in my club than where they came from.”

“That’s kind of awful,” I say softly.

“It is, but I prefer knowing they are safe within my four walls than victim to anyone else.”

“What if they wan—”

“I’m not here to discuss my club. Not all women are victims, Zara. They want to be there. They are talented dancers.” His tone is severe.

Blushing, I turn my head and reprimand myself for being so narrow-minded. I know not all men are like *them*, but sometimes it’s hard to differentiate where Callan is concerned. I don’t peg him as the conservative type. He screams illegal.

“So why are you here, Callan?” I finish my breakfast, making a spectacle of cleaning my spoon in my mouth. He smiles darkly at me and takes the spoon back, and sucks on it, drawing it out of his own mouth with a pop. My heart gallops, soars, and I press my teeth into my cheek. *He’s playing with you. Don’t give in. Don’t react.* The words whisper through my mind over and over. I should be petrified of this man, and I am, but not for the reasons I suspect others are. It’s something entirely different that has my heart palpitating and my mind racing away with thoughts that have no place being there.

He adjusts his suit and threads his fingers together, resting them on the countertop.

“I have a busy week. I wanted to see you.” He has a five o’clock shadow—a glaze of dark hair around his chin and throat. It adds a layer of roughness I’d not yet noticed from him. The tattoos and black stare, the dark suits, and offhand remarks make Callan Scott a hard man to fathom. Despite all of that, he is always impossibly clean, which just reminds me that he knows how to be untraceable—as though he has scrubbed any DNA away and is a walking apparition. He always appears in my home without being seen and leaves with little fuss; he is a ghost. Today he seems less put together. He hasn’t shaved, and his usually seamless jaw is smattered with the darkest hair trying to break free. I’ve been gawking at him for far too long.

“Stare at me, more like. No gun?” I jest. He gives me a mild headshake and follows me as I move and deposit my bowl in the sink. I fill it quickly and dunk my hands in the soapy water. He locks me in again, but he keeps his distance. How does he manage such restraint? I want to fall back and feel the heat from his body enveloping mine. Is this another game? Does he torture victims like this, prolonging it as much as he can, drawing every ounce of energy from them before he finally moves in for the kill?

“Why don’t you ever touch me?” I whisper. Now is not the time to have this conversation. I am supposed to be meeting Miranda to go over my week before I leave for Greece.

“If I touch you, I won’t stop,” Callan whispers. “If I touch you, I have to walk away. Are you ready for that, Zara? To say goodbye? I know I’m not.” My hands are shaking, my heart hummingbird quick. Oh, Jesus. No, I’m not, and what does that say about me.

I need to stop this. Stop him invading my life, taking ownership of most of my waking thoughts. I pull my hands free from the water and dry them, all the while aware he is a foot away from me. I don’t worry about touching him as my movements have him stepping back. My elbow knocks his chest lightly, and I flick a look over my shoulder at him, waiting for any answer.

He moves and takes my chin, pulling me close to his face. His breath fans out and attacks my lashes, and I fight to keep my eyes open. I thought he said he wouldn’t touch me.

“I thought you weren’t going to touch me,” I spit. I want his mouth. I want him to loosen his hold and sink into me. I want this man so completely that it mocks reason.

“You’ll know when I touch you, Zara,” he murmurs, his other hand lifting until my head is cradled in big hands whilst his thumbs run up and down my cheeks.

“You’re so full of yourself. It’s not attractive,” I splutter, my cheeks aflame. He moves in and presses my hips back into the counter, and I feel everything. All of him. My eyes flash wide up into his, and his jaw locks. *He’s not attractive. He’s not attractive.*

“Close your eyes, Zara.” His soft command works magic on my eyes as they fall shut and every other sense awakens. His cheek rests on mine. “I could have you now, right here. You wouldn’t stop me. That little dress would be so easy to tear, then I’d be pushing flush into your body.” He applies pressure, and my god, it’s like being doused in liquid fire. “Taking, owning. I’ll ruin this body for anyone else.” *He’s not attractive. He’s not attractive!*

“Callan,” I plead. I can’t do this. Not with someone like him. He is everything I have been running from.

“You want me. Say it. Stop fighting it. I need to hear your want. It’s driving me mad,” he confesses in a growl. He grinds into me, and I moan softly, sparks of heat firing through my groin. Wide hands take my dress, then he rakes it upwards, thrusting his hand between my legs, knocking my legs apart so he is cupping me. He nips my ear, and before I know what is happening, I’m rocking my hips.

“Please.” I have no shame in begging. I want him. Callan. Big, scary, unscrupulous, Callan Scott. My knickers are moved aside with care. I twist and look up at him. I need to see him. I plead with my eyes.

“I need to hear it, Zara,” he says gruffly, keeping his fingers just out of reach.

“I want you, please.” I clutch his shoulders and drop forwards when a deft finger drags through my sex. “Oh, God.” He feels incredible, the sensation rolling along and outwards in my body, causing a tidal wave of awareness to brandish me as mush. My mind is blank, and no fear lingers. No anxiety holding me prisoner to a past I have no blame for. I’m lost to his touch. One touch and all sensibility has been ripped away, leaving me bare to feel nothing more than a woman for the first time ever. It’s intoxicating.

Callan moves, stepping back and staring at my knicker-clad body. With a dirty smile, he lifts his glistening finger and pops it in his mouth, drawing it

out oh so slowly, like the spoon. His eyes black fire on mine. “Beats porridge any day.” With a quick tug, my dress is back in place. Is that it?!

“I thought if you touched me, you couldn’t stop?” I’m breathless.

“I lied. Have a good day, Zara.” With another one of his smug smiles, he is moving away from me. I’m shocked stiff as I watch helplessly. He’s leaving me like this!

Every curse imaginable rushes up my throat, yet the only words that come out are, “That’s the only time you get to touch me. Don’t bother coming back!”

His parting shot is a mocking laugh. I curse loudly and stomp through the house, too hot and bothered, too needy to be able to leave, feeling like I’m ready to explode. I head for my room in need of a cold shower. My bedside drawer is ajar. Frowning, I walk over and stare at the slight crack, a curious pout. He’s been up here. I rip open my drawer, finding a note and ribbon tied to my vibrator with a simple black rose: a rose as black as our hair, as black as his eyes. Dark.

In those raw moments, you’ll think of me. C

What the hell? I cannot believe he planned all this. He is like no person I have ever met. The guy is a sociopath. How can he just... he just walked away. That surely affected him? I’m a wreck. How on earth is he still so in control? I stare at the note, reading it over, my lip curling in fury.

“I will not, you stupid, arrogant, piece of...fuck!” I slam the drawer shut. How fucking dare he? I’m not wearing this now. I strip, quickly removing my clothes and fight the urge to bin them in my rage, but stop short as it hangs limply over the small bin in my en-suite. I’m giving him too much power over my emotions. Over my body. Why on earth did I let that happen? Some small part of me screams *you wanted it*, but I quieten it quickly. Callan is not the kind of man I can let into my life. I want out of this charade. He’s another obstacle if I carry on down this path—he’s too much of a risk. I pick something new and get dressed quickly. It’s barely nine, so I have plenty of time before I leave to meet Miranda.

I am in no way calm or less aroused by the time I arrive at the office to meet my agent. Feeling this way is only keeping my mind on a man I don’t want to think about, keeping me attached to him in some form. I slam my door, still riled up, and head inside. The space is clean and minimal, walls of fashion icons and top models line the reception. I see myself a few times,

and it still baffles me that this is the life I'm living. If someone had told me fifteen years ago I would be a model by the time I was twenty-three, I would have laughed and carried on digging mud up at home to make a fairy garden. Now I'm as polished as the magazine covers I grace. As refined as the food I eat at high-end restaurants. All things that don't matter to me but play a part in keeping me secure in this role.

I hear the click of Miranda's heels before I see her. She turns the corner, looking a vision in a cream halter dress and nude heels.

"Morning, you okay?" she asks, looking up from her phone, "did you run here?" She laughs.

I touch my cheeks, aware they must look flushed.

"No, just rushing about," I lie. "How's the renovation going?"

"Not too bad. They are installing the windows this week. I'm hoping the weather holds out." Her face is still fixed to her screen as she walks back to her office, speaking to me as she goes.

"That's good. You mentioned you have chosen appliances. When do they go in?"

"Whilst you're in Greece. Here, I have been sent a more detailed brief for the shoot." She hands me a printout. "I already told them no nudes, so ignore that when you get to it."

"It's a swimwear shoot. I'm supposed to be clothed, not naked," I mutter, scanning the page until I find the point she mentioned. They've asked for topless, which isn't horrendous. I have done it before. I could do it again. I will see how it pans out when I get there. Better to say no and negotiate than agree and go back on my word. We spend the next hour arranging everything for my trip; it's no surprise that it's an early start, and as soon as I'm landing, I'm working. I just hope my flight isn't delayed.

Miranda emails me all the details for the upcoming casting.

"This is for Dolce, all being well with your flight, it's in the bag." She winks at me. She has far more faith in me than I do. I play the part, but I don't love it like the other women. It's ironic that they hunger for these jobs, and I just step into them unwillingly, uninterested, and land them each time. Each new job leaves me with a sour taste of guilt, but my fear outweighs it every time. It's hard to hate it when it is the only thing keeping me alive. I have far more to lose than they will ever comprehend.

"We'll see," I reply.

“Always so modest.” Her chuckle is bright like her hair, and unlike my sleek bob, her hair flounces as she moves. “I have draft images for the magazine. Come with me.” We move through the building and down to one of the design rooms, where the articles are set out for us to look at. They are good, and I have to admit I look ultra-sophisticated in my suit.

“They need to caption this: women rule the world.” She nudges me, and I scoff.

“Give over. They don't know me. It's just an image,” I say defensively.

“Just an image. This screams power, sex, control, dominance, and allure. Mischief. Zara, you have such an impact on females, and you truly have no idea.” She tuts and huffs.

“Maybe.” I blush. Being told these things makes me feel such a fake. Worthless. They see what they want, not who I am, and it's so difficult to keep the façade up when I just want to tear Zara Reid from my life and be someone else. The real me. If only I knew who that was. I laugh inwardly.

“A hundred percent, even this suit will sell out.” She knocks the pages, bringing my mind back from running free from this life.

Instead, I aim my focus on hers.

“So, how is Phil?” I ask breezily, flicking the pages, waiting for her response. She has been on/off dating Philip Vanderson, a film executive, for almost a year. One week they are loved up, and then the next, not so much. I always dread hearing how awful things are, but I really don't want to talk about myself any longer.

“I've been busy with the renovation,” she mutters on a frown, and by her muted tone, I can sense things aren't going so great. I honestly don't understand why she sticks with him. He is good looking in a typically Hollywood type of way. He is beyond successful and rich, but the man is a bit of an ass.

“I bet. At least once it's completed, you can spend some time together. Have you booked a holiday?” Last year they went to Bali, and from Miranda's account, it didn't go so well.

“No, not yet, not after last year's holiday hell. I think Philip and I will probably look to go somewhere in the med.”

“Well, if Greece is any good, I will let you know,” I offer. She nods and gives me a quick hug before I head out and home for the day.

Being home with the added concern that at any moment, Callan could just walk in whenever he pleases has me leaning over the sofa for my

phone. With a quick google search, I'm pulling it to my ear, and after a few rings, the call connects. "Hello, Lock and Key. Michael speaking, how can I help?"

"Oh hi, I wondered if you could give me a quote for a full lock change plus window fixings?"

"Can do. How many windows, love?" I pull back, smothering a smile at his tone.

I do a quick mental count and let him know.

"I've had several break-ins," I add. "I really need to make sure whatever I upgrade to, it's going to be top range."

"I mean, how top range because it will cost you?" he says, tapping away, no doubt adding up the costs of my quote.

"That's fine. My safety is more important."

"That it is," he replies. "I can give a basic quote now, but it would be better to view the property."

"Of course, the sooner, the better."

"Well, I have a few guys out and about. What area are you in? Maybe they can swing by?" That sounds perfect. I experience a wave of relief, knowing soon I will be Callan-free. He will be locked out, and I will have won. Now to put the arrogant prick in his place.

Chapter Ten

“So, where are you taking me?” Oscar asks over-excitedly, adjusting his sleeve. The motion sends a waft of aftershave over me. He smells good and looks good. I know he met Chloe this week for dinner, and it seemed to go well. He was prattling on about her as we got ready at mine.

“A club,” I say dismissively. If Oscar picks up any clue just what I have planned, he will hit the roof. I suppress a cheeky smile and check my reflection as our Uber moves through the thick of London.

“I know that, but which club?” He steals my compact, checking his hair before giving it back.

“If you knew that, then it wouldn't be a surprise,” I say, clicking my compact shut, giving him a wink. Oh, he is going to explode. I know we aren't far from Hex now, and as soon as we pull up, Oscar will be ready to drag me back home.

“Arsehole,” he mutters. Oh, he has no idea. Ten minutes later, we pull up outside a glittering club. The outside isn't much different to Skyn. The big white building has columns lit up by faint purple tones, twisted bushes are potted out along the front, and the letters HEX are brandished in a matte black over the wide entryway.

“No, absolutely not!” Oscar snaps as we come to a stop. I'm already pushing at the door, and he grabs my wrist to halt me. “Zara, no,” he says forcefully, his excited face now replaced by a deep frown and flat mouth. He is super grumpy at me.

“I'm going in with or without you.” I step out, turning to face the queue outside, which drags back for what seems like forever. I don't have a membership, so I step up onto the pavement when Oscar hooks his arms through mine, and a myriad of flashes happen.

“I am so pissed off at you!” he growls, leaning in, his curly hair tickling my cheek.

“You'll forgive me.” I grin. I move to the queue, but Oscar pulls me back towards the door and shakes his head, suppressing a curse.

“Hey, Vance,” he says roughly to the doorman, who looks ready to snap Oscar’s neck. Obviously, news of his rule-breaking has spread through Callan’s clubs. Shit, maybe this wasn’t a good idea. Vance touches his ear, and I notice his earpiece. Is he asking for authorisation to allow us in? Is *he* here? With a nod over his shoulder, he allows us in. I sag a little and move ahead, bypassing the queue with Oscar at my side.

Music is pulsing, and on entering, I see multiple giant hexagons suspended from the ceiling, trapeze artists moving fluidly around the thin frame, and notice that the colour scheme from outside is continued throughout. Oscar leans into me.

“Want to tell me what the hell is going on?” he asks, directing me to the furthest wall where the bar is situated.

“Nothing is going on,” I say defensively. Except that I have had all my locks changed, and I’m here to teach Callan Scott a damn lesson. The club isn’t exactly heaving, but there are plenty of people for us to move around before we make it to the bar. My eyes sweep left and right, and I tell myself it’s to look at the exquisite interior, much like Skyn, and I begrudgingly admit I like it. I’m trying, and possibly failing, to locate one overpowering and arrogant owner—that’s if he isn’t at that place Nexo I’d heard of or arse deep in one of his pole dancers. I have no right to care about such matters, but the thought sours my soul rotten. I straighten my back, determined not to allow Callan anymore thought. This is exactly why I need to cut loose.

“I call bullshit.” Oscar’s tone is brusque, and he leans into the bar and orders himself a vodka and me a tonic. “You know Callan owns this place,” his voice lowers so only he and I are privy to our conversation, “you’re getting yourself in too deep, Zara.”

“Or perhaps I’m trying to untangle myself,” I grate out, annoyed at the warning in his tone.

“You can’t untangle yourself when you are in the thick of it?” His hands lift in frustration. “Look around you. You are in his domain, and you’re poking an angry bear,” he snaps and turns to accept our drinks, practically thrusting mine into my hand.

He’s starting to piss me off, but I grit my teeth. I brought him along and knew I would have to endure his wrath, and I hoped he would be a small barrier between Callan and myself. For once, Oscar will have no intention of leaving me, knowing Callan is so close. That’s if he is here—maybe

someone else authorised our entry. I say as much to Oscar and begin to move away, back onto the dance floor.

“You're here. If he's not here yet, he soon will be. This whole idea screams inexperience, Zara. I love you, but you have *one* experience of dealing with men and look how that turned out. Now you're trying to take on Callan fucking Scott. You've no idea who he is or what he can do,” he utters, his eyes holding mine, conveying just how concerned for me he is. The worry pulling at the corners of his eyes has me faltering in my plan. I see it then, the fear in Oscar; he is terrified. I've truly taken leave of my senses. Callan Scott has turned my brain to pulverised sludge. The man is, without a doubt, inhumanely terrifying and armed. I know I have been burning the candle, but exhaustion is absolutely no excuse to dance with the devil. I swallow harshly and turn away. Shit.

Around the room, hexagonal seating booths in a light purple material circle the dance floor, and overhead, the women swing and dance on their trapeze. It's enough to make the most sober of people feel queasy, or perhaps I just feel queasy because sense has finally struck, and I've realised what a mental twat I'm being.

“We should go,” I whisper.

“Too late.” Oscar sighs hopelessly. I flick worried eyes to him and follow his stare to a large shadow, watching up high from behind the gauzy white curtains of the VIP area. I grab Oscar's drink and neck it, almost heaving at the burn in my throat and the harsh thud it causes in my stomach.

“Zara!” Oscar yells, snatching his glass back, then his finger is in my face. “What the hell has got into you?” Narrowed eyes rake down me, disgusted at my behaviour. I want to blame him. I was full of confidence when I came in here until he opened his big mouth!

“You. You're freaking me out. I had this!” I spit. “Have it,” I correct, “I'm cutting myself loose from that man no matter what it takes.” The vodka has finally hit me, and I feel a warm, weightless sensation move through my limbs.

“You need to think this through.” He takes my arm, pulling me into him as a few people have turned to look at us.

“I wake up, and he is in my apartment. I arrive home, and he is in my bedroom. I go out, and he takes me home,” I growl, watching Oscar's eyes widen with horror.

“Z, I had no idea.” He hugs me tight, and I let him, hooping my arms to hug him back and sighing. I go lax and enjoy the feeling of being platonically physical with someone.

“I’ve changed all the locks. I just need it done now,” I whisper. I never suspected when I became close with a man, it would result in him breaking into my home, following me, and enduring hours of stares for his own pleasure.

“Okay, but we should go.” Oscar pulls back to look at me before flicking an anxious look upstairs.

“No, I need to cut myself loose. I need to tell him,” I say hurriedly, rubbing at my forehead. People move closer to us as they dance. Oscar shakes his head, sensing my resolve. He doesn't agree, and I'm sure he will remind me time and time again what a bad idea this is as the night progresses.

“That is your great plan, to turn up unannounced and anger the beast upstairs?” Oscar snorts, unimpressed. I want to remind him that had he not taken me with him that night, I possibly wouldn't be in this mess. Although I am just as at fault as he is, as I could have easily stayed in the car, but I didn't. That was my choice, and I'm learning the consequences of those choices do not fit well into my life.

“Okay, now that you say it out loud, it sounds like an awful plan, but it's the only one I have because the man is as stubborn as an ox, and maybe he just needs to be told. No means no,” I mutter crossly. I shake my hair as the music changes into a low pulse, and I grab Oscar's hand. “Let's dance.”

He happily obliges, even if I can see him sneaking glances up to the VIP area. I'm going to dance my feet off and possibly flirt shamelessly with another gorgeous guy. One who doesn't growl and break into my home, a man that smiles and isn't packing. Who the hell carries a gun everywhere? I shudder. I've become so desensitised to such things that my mind never took stock of the danger I have been in with Callan.

That one vodka has sent me into a tipsy stupor, so Oscar has kept me on tonic water since. I feel good, relaxed, and loose-limbed. Bishop Briggs comes on, and I lift my arms and move my hips in slow, hypnotic twists. Oscar sings it to me, and I twirl and bump into someone.

“Ooops, sorry.” I grin and find deep green eyes smiling down at me.

He's tall, blonde, and fairly attractive. He leans down.

“No apology needed, beautiful, although I won't say no to a dance.” He winks. I grin and hold my hand out for him to take it. He does and pulls me into him on a twist. “I'm Liam.” He laughs as I spin and fall into his chest.

“Zara.” He's late twenties and not much taller than me.

“I know who you are,” he says, looking away and chancing a glance at me through his lashes. He doesn't know me, not at all. No one does, but I don't pick him up on it. With my back to him, I begin to move. When his hands hit my hips, I can only think of one person, and it's not the one dancing behind me. My gaze lifts instinctively, and he's there, a wide shadow behind the curtains, staring down at us from the upper viewing area. The curtain shifts, and out he steps: tall, big, and mad. His black eyes seem to laser through me and when he leans on to the balustrade, gripping until his knuckles turn as white as his shirt, do I realise the enormity of my mistake. Oscar suddenly appears in front of me and is dragging me out of Liam's grip.

The tension rippling through Callan has me faltering. I fear any second he is going to catapult himself over the balcony and jump to the ground floor.

“We need to leave *now*,” Oscar snaps. I nod and let him pull me free.

“Hey, we're dancing, mate.” Liam steps in the way.

“Look, *mate*,” I know Oscar hates that term, “unless you want a black eye, let us go,” he snarls, seemingly scary for the first time ever. Shit, I've never seen Oscar so defensive. Oscar pulls us away, and I walk numbly beside him, shocked by his display, but Liam is having none of it.

“Are you threatening me?” Oh god, here we go. I groan and place a hand on Liam's chest to placate him, but he slaps it away, and Oscar gets right in his face.

“Don't touch her like that!” Oscar spits, pushing the taller guy back. Liam is more intoxicated than I realised. He regains his balance quickly and advances on us both but is stopped when a guy with a trim beard and a shaved head steps between us all, tall, bulky and mean-as-hell looking. Where on earth does Callan find these thugs?

“Please leave,” he says over the music. It's clear he is security. His voice is loud and unmistakably final. Liam isn't alone. Two friends pull him away, and with a last tug back from his mates, Liam leaves, and I look at the man glowering at Oscar.

“Tony, we were just leaving.” Tony, his cousin. I can’t see the resemblance. Oscar is athletic, but nothing like this man’s stature. His chest is big, his eyes hard. They have clearly lived two very different lives.

“You are. She’s not.” He looks at me. “Come with me,” he says, his jaw locking. I can see by the way he glances at me disdainfully that he doesn’t like me.

“Fuck. Fuck!” Oscar yells, his face sagging in worry. “Tony, please let me come back with her. I can’t let anything happen to her,” he pleads.

Tony laughs and shakes his head.

“He knew you would say that, so here’s your ultimatum. Leave, or he will hurt her, stay, and her pain is on you.” Tony may have leaned into Oscar, but I hear the threat loud and clear.

I snap to look up at Callan, who merely shrugs down at me. He’s playing to win, using his reputation to manipulate us. I grab Oscar and hug him hard.

“I will be fine, promise. I’ll call you as soon as I leave,” I say fiercely. I will be okay. I have to believe that.

“I’m waiting outside for you,” he says vehemently. I nod and kiss his cheek. Oscar stands still, watching me walk away with Tony before he begins shuffling his way through the throng of people. Tony holds me firmly as he manoeuvres us through the club until we hit the wide and floating staircase. A security guard removes the rope and nods us through. As soon as we are above, I expect to find Callan waiting for me, but the VIP area is occupied by a few other celebrities and over-excited patrons who have managed to haggle their way up to the clouds of luxury Callan has designed. The gauze curtains are just the start of how utterly stunning it is up here.

“This way,” Tony mutters. I glance at him and see the disapproving frown on his face. Arsehole!

He, like thousands of other people, has made his mind up about me without so much as an introduction.

“Don’t look at me like that. Maybe tell your boss to leave me alone, then I wouldn’t have to get in here just to find him to tell him myself,” I snap. He shakes his head and stalks ahead. I quicken my pace in my heels and growl when Tony doesn’t hold each curtain open but lets it drop back in place in front of me, so I’m snatching them out of my face. “Very mature.”

Scoffing, I find him waiting beside a door. He looks towards the ceiling at a camera, and the door disappears into the wall, opening for us. I expect him to leave me, but he carries on his way, and I follow him down a door-lined corridor until we reach a few steps.

“Up there. Knock before you enter,” he says brusquely. I give him a false smile and climb the steps and walk straight in, ignoring his insult as he stomps away. The big door leads straight into Callan’s office. The space is clean-cut and white all over, nothing like the dark wood office at Skyn.

“You wanted my attention, now you have it,” Callan spits, replacing his suit jacket from where it was placed over the back of a chair, “but let me tell you one thing, Zara—usually my attention is the last thing people want to attract.” He hasn’t looked at me, and it’s not until I’m standing in his presence that I realise I have dressed for him. The all-in-one black pantsuit is both revealing and elegant. As much as I need to do this to cut all ties with this man, I find his attraction oddly fascinating.

“And yet I’ve had your attention despite not ever wanting it, funny little fact you have missed,” I drawl, walking across the floor to the windows overlooking the club and VIP area. He must look down on all this and pick victims off, choosing who isn’t worthy and who can take a step closer to the clouds of the VIP. My lip curls, although I mask my emotions before I turn to look at him. He has finally graced me with his eyes.

“You look like you’re wearing Catwoman’s underwear,” he remarks, adjusting his cuffs and throwing a disgruntled look my way. “And you want my attention,” he drawls before landing me with a stare so harsh that I stiffen. He is daring me to deny it and not for kicks—he is furious at me. A dare to a man like Callan is an invitation to death. It’s not a game or a joke.

“It was nice at first, but I’ve come to realise I don’t want nice, and I don’t want your attention.” Damn my voice for wobbling. It’s him. His movements put me on edge. Oscar’s fear has become my own.

Callan is a foot away from me. I crane my neck to meet that dead stare. His eyes are so emotionless, but his body speaks for him.

“You came all this way just to tell me that.” He chuckles.

“Yes.”

“You’re a terrible liar. Why make so much effort for a lie?” He cups my face so gently. The tension in his office is stifling, and his body is bristling, so this softness confuses me. “Do you always dress in such a manner to provoke a lack of appeal in men, or do you not own a mirror?” he breathes.

“I’m on a night out, in a club!” I defend. Am I that transparent to him? I look away, embarrassed. Oscar’s words come back to me, and I shrink on the inside. It’s true, I have no experience with men, certainly not in this capacity.

“My club,” he counters. He is so close, and I look right in those eyes: so black. So unnerving.

“Are you wearing contacts?” I stupidly whisper. Callan’s head drops forwards with a smirk.

“No, Zara. I’m not wearing contacts. Are you going to continue lying?”

“Lying?” I’m baffled. I’m still searching his eyes for evidence of a lens.

“This morning, you were more than attracted to me. You begged for my attention, even admitted you want me, so are you lying when you tell me you don’t want my attention now?” His mouth moves from one ear to the other, his lips gliding along my skin. I can smell his aftershave, and I’m hot and needy once more.

Shaking my head and scrunching my eyes tight, I have a moment of shock because I have the oddest sensation to cry. How does he do this to me? Pick me apart, mock me, urge me on. I’m being pulled every which way, and my mind is screaming for me to give in and run.

“No.” I tremble.

“No?” He laughs. “You’re shaking, and you can’t even look at me. You want me, beautiful. You want me so fucking badly that I can taste the need pouring out of you,” he growls. “You twist me up, Zara, and I can’t wait to fuck you,” he admits gruffly.

“No,” I say again. Trying and failing to repel any images his words have provoked. “I don’t want your attention,” I say, staring downwards, rendered useless. Where the hell has my feisty side gone? I need it back.

“Why are you torturing yourself?” he asks lightly, a laugh slipping free. He grips my face and shakes it gently to get my attention, wanting my eyes. I shake my head. I can’t do this. “Look at me, Zara,” he demands.

My eyes painfully meet his, and I decide the truth is the only thing that will make him believe me.

“Yes, I want you, yes you are stupidly attractive, but I also do *not* want your attention. I do *not* want to find you attractive, and I sure as hell don’t want to want you,” I say with conviction. I search his gaze, pleading with him to believe me, to walk away.

His smug face slowly morphs into one of irritation.

“You’re full of shi—”

“I had all the locks changed. You need to leave me alone, Callan,” I state, and tug my chin free. I’m panting, and Callan looks ready to fling me on any available surface. “This, whatever it was, is over. I’m leaving, and I won’t be visiting any of your clubs again. Please leave me alone,” I whisper.

Grinding his jaw, he steps back and casts a pitiful look at me. We stare for the briefest of moments, and his lip curls in a sneer.

“Well, fuck off then.” His simple dismissal has me flinching. What a prick! He heads back to his desk, lifting his phone speaking into it. “I’m ready to head over to Skyn.”

Oh, I just bet he is, with all his naked women at his disposal. I spin on my heel and stalk to the door, not even caring to look back. *Good riddance*, I think, wanting to laugh out. I drag the door open, but just as I’m about to step out, Callan stalks through it, leaving me in his wake and gaping after him. God, the man is a monumental cock. I follow him down the corridor, but where I head to the end, he takes a right and enters a lift. I stop and look at him, but he is staring at his phone. Uninterested and apparently over whatever this was.

I let myself look at him for one last moment before the elevator closes. That’s it. We’re done with this.

Chapter Eleven

The beach has been cordoned off, and over the last two days, myself, Samson, and another model have posed on the sand, showcasing Viola Griffin's new swimwear collection. I'm sun-kissed already, thanks to my natural latte skin, and I've had sand sprayed onto my body to give me a sexy beach vibe. My hair is loosely curled and not at all sleek. My makeup, although heavy, gives the impression I'm free of it. The tiny string bikini I'm wearing leaves, oh so very little to the imagination, and Samson has given me the once over way too many times.

"Okay, this is it. The sunset is really going to give this a raunchy romantic feel. Roll around, get into the water, but try not to get your hair wet, Zar." I hate that Gio calls me that. I smile and look at Samson as we get into position. "Remember, you are both deeply in love." Gah. I smile and look at Samson to give him a full stare, conveying my fake emotions, when I see Callan standing at the tape, holding citizens at bay and staring openly at me. I mentally gape and try to shake it off. Why is he here? How does he know?

I know why he is here. *I will look over every inch of this body, taste it, touch it. Are you ready for me, Zara?* I thought we were done.

"Are you ready, Zara?" Gio calls, pulling my head back around.

"You okay?" Samson takes my hand, and I nod absently. I can't believe he crossed an ocean for me.

"Of course, let's do this." Samson reclines again and drops into position so I'm half on him, half in the sand. We've already practised this, but adrenaline is coursing through my body. It hums, and I know it's because he is watching. I can't help but notice him in my peripheral. He stands out like a sore thumb: big and commanding in his dress trousers and white shirt open at the neck. His tattoos make him look all the more intimidating. I blow out a breath, and Samson squeezes my hip.

"You sure you're good?"

“Yes.” No. I feel agitated. Hot under the collar, actually, just hot because I’m not wearing a damn thing. Samson spins us, and I’m pressed into the sand. My arms lift as we both face the camera, supposedly lost in a sea of passion. I know I will be later when Callan takes what he so desperately wants, desperate enough to get on a plane and follow me. Shit. How am I supposed to escape him now? I thought he understood and accepted it.

Viola is a big deal, and her swimwear is worn by all the world’s most notable celebrities. I even have a few pieces myself, and I wanted to work with her again. I jumped at the chance, but I almost backed out when I heard it was with a male model. It’s part of the job, and I’ve been photographed professionally with many established models, but it also brings a complication with it. I can see that slow burn in Samson’s eyes, knowing before long he will approach me in a more personal capacity. I hate being the ice queen, but I can’t allow people into my life.

We do a few more shots with us being more playful, me on his back, him resting his head in my lap. I prefer those, but when I look up, Callan is no longer there. I stand from where I was sitting and look around for him. Did I imagine him there? Maybe I’ve had too much sun, or maybe I am losing my mind. A few minutes later, we call it, and I begin collecting my things up.

“So, Zara, fancy grabbing a bite to eat, a drink maybe?” Sam asks, and there we go, a quick fake roll in the sand, and I’m a good-time girl.

“I’m beat. I’m going to head back and chill out. Great work today.” I know I sound patronising, but I want to put distance between us. Need to. His face shutters, but he forces a grin on his face.

“Sure, catch you in the morning.”

I head off the beach, walking back to where all the cars are parked and find a mountain of a man waiting by a blacked-out car. I stop and stare at the man as he lifts his chin, instructing me to go over. With a short sigh, I walk to him and look up. I recognise the sunglasses from the time I knocked on the Range Rover window.

“Is he in the back?” I ask politely.

“Mr Scott will meet you back at the villa.”

Oh, will he now! I grind my teeth and give the colossal man a smile. I have two options here. I either return to my hotel where he will no doubt track me down, or I can go with his henchman. He opens the door, and I get in. I’m disappointed Callan isn’t in here. Why did he leave?

The journey is longer than I expect, and we are moving away from the town into more rugged terrain. It's barren but beautiful. After another ten minutes, when we finally take a left up a sharp incline—iron gates and surprisingly deep green foliage are what greet us.

“Impressive,” I say. The big guy up front gives a slight nod of his head. “So you’re Stalin?” I ask, leaning back in the seat and watching the palm trees flit past as we head up a long drive. My eyes lift to the rear-view mirror, and I can tell he is looking at me. His lips twitch the tiniest amount before he powers us forward faster.

“Yes, ma’am.” I did think that was the case.

“Zara,” I correct, flicking my eyes to meet once again in the mirror, and he gives me a curt nod. We dip and head back down the other side of the hill. Nestled below is a secluded villa. It's private and luxurious, and I blow out a slow breath. It's just going to be us there. No Oscar to call for backup. No place for me to go to. I have no lay of the land. I’m on foreign soil, and my navigation skills are terrible. There is a small part of me that is equally happy to be off the grid. For the first time ever, no one knows where I am. Except him. He seems to always know where I am.

Stalin parks up, and I stare at the extremely beautiful villa: old clashing with new. Stalin is there to get the door for me, and I suck in a breath when I get out. I’m still in my modelling swimsuit. I’m glad I grabbed a cover-up and pulled that on before I left. My flip-flops slap gently against the stone steps, and that door is also held open for me. He nods me in, and I step over the threshold into a spacious home, but no Callan. I know why he is here, what I am walking into, although I don't think I will ever be truly ready for a man like him. The place is quiet, and when the door clicks behind me, I jump because Stalin hasn't come in.

“Callan?” I call. The main living area is open to the kitchen and what doors there are inside are open, and I can't see him anywhere. I stop at the bottom step for what I assume are bedrooms and call him again, but nothing. I wander across the floor to the bank of doors open to the view overlooking the ocean. The soft rush of water and splashing draws my eyes that way. That’s where I find him—in the pool—a dark object powering through the water. His tattoos that I have only glimpsed at are nothing short of a work of art. He is covered, from high up his neck right down his sleek arms to trail over his hands, gliding in and out of the water. His wide frame careens the water out as if a shark was seeking its prey. He is streamlined so

naturally that I gawp and belatedly realise he is as naked as any other predator in the wild would be. Sensing I'm here, he stops at the far end and hoists himself out in one fluid push. I stare open-mouthed as he turns without any shame and walks to me. My eyes are fixated on his chest, but I can see everything. Everything. I baulk. My mouth flays like a fish, and he smirks, leaning past me, getting my shoulder and arm wet to grab a towel behind me.

"Zara," he says by way of greeting, my wide eyes meeting his nervously. Am I really going to do this? Dance with the devil?

"I... I... I didn't know. Stalin said to come in... I." Pathetic, absolutely pathetic, Zara!

"You look nice," he comments, his finger tracing my neck, over my shoulder to where my beach cover-up is hanging off my arm.

"Thanks. Can you put some clothes on?" I garble.

"No." Black irises smirk into mine. "Do you know why you're here, Zara?" I swallow. Yes. He wants me. He's made that very clear.

"Surely I should be asking you that?" There. I sound far more confident. "We agreed this was done."

"I don't believe I agreed to anything," he says with a dark smile.

"You told me to fuck off!" I snap.

Callan pats his big chest, and I have to fight with myself not to look.

"Your lies were starting to piss me off." He wraps the towel around his hips and knots it securely. "Why didn't you tell me you were leaving the country?" My eyes blink away, but he pulls me back, his hand holding my chin so I have no choice but to look him in the eye. When I give no answer, he shakes his head slowly at me. "You didn't need to come here with Stalin, so tell me, Zara, why are you here?"

Holy hell, this is it. It's going to happen. Every word I uttered to this man about not wanting him is mocking me now, because I know I'm not going to leave this villa untouched.

"Sex," I breathe in a whisper. For the first time ever, I feel self-conscious. This man is so big, so enigmatic, lethal, and intense. I feel suddenly inadequate, vulnerable, and small.

"For the world's most beautiful woman, you're a shy little thing." I laugh uncertainly. He's right. Every ounce of confidence has evaporated in the face of such a painfully handsome man. "Why are you so nervous?"

His big chest expands with a deep inhale, and once again, I notice how he is a whole shoulder and head taller than me. I itch to trace the lines on his body. It's his neck that has my attention; the tattoo there is quite simply very dark. The most realistic hands are etched into his skin in a stranglehold, and the words below read: 'death by my own hands'. I watch his throat work and try to read into the stark lettering painted on his neck.

"I wasn't expecting you to be here. I thought I wouldn't see you again," I say stupidly, and his lips twitch. There is no way that what is about to happen between us will be a minimal moment. Something is happening here. Something my body is waking up to. A deep transient connection has come alive, and it is rushing to the surface to meet its maker. Him. He's waking up my soul. A rush of adrenaline spikes with a desire so overwhelming it tightens my chest. I stutter out a shaky breath. "You're so big," I admit, my eyes drifting up to find the unusual black softer somehow. They darken to an abyss at my softly spoken words.

Callan adjusts his stance. His fingers take the hem of my cover-up, and he lifts it over my head as his jaw works. I'm still littered with sand. I'm sure I dirtied his car up on the drive here. It hits me that this will be the last time I see this man. I drag a lungful of air in and close my eyes when his fingers trace down the slope of my breast.

"It's more than that. You're so tense. When was the last time you were with a man?" My eyes snap open, and I loosely wrap my arms around my waist and scuff my flip-flop on the floor.

Do I admit that my first time has been my only time, and it was over before I ever knew what I was supposed to be feeling? No, I don't want this man knowing more than he already does.

"A while."

"How long?" He takes the tie at the base of my neck and undoes it. The bikini drops forward and hangs over my arms. "How long?" he grates out with a rough breath, eyes trained on my breasts. Deft fingertips draw a gentle caress around my nipple.

He is persistent, demanding.

"Four years," I tell him. Callan's eyes snap to mine, shocked. I see it so clearly. His usual impassive face is fractured completely by my confession. He works his neck slowly.

"Good." The bikini top is stripped away, and strong hands snap the bikini bottoms to relieve me of those, too. "Kick your shoes off." I'm

panting wildly as Callan hooks the towel undone, and I get an eyeful of him aroused. I kick my shoes away and run my hand over the back of my neck, waiting for his next move. When his hands latch onto my hips, I expect him to hoist me up his front, but he swings me over his shoulder, and his teeth sink into my ass.

“Shit!” I yelp. He licks the wound and laughs as I bob on his shoulder, my breasts squashed to his back.

“You need to relax, Zara, because I don’t plan on taking it slowly with you.” Air huffs out as he lowers me onto a bed-sized lounge overlooking the beach and ocean. “I hope here is good enough for you because I want all the natural light I can get.” He delivers the line roughly. I hum out my response, too wound up to really give him an answer.

“I sure hope you’re more vocal than this. I’m starting to miss that smart mouth.” He grabs said mouth and drags his thumb over it, his black eyes taking in my rumbled state. I bite my lip, and his chuckle vibrates through my tummy. He has the sexiest laugh. With a flick, my hands are positioned above my head. My legs are bent and spread, and he leans back and feasts on my sex. “Prettiest damn pussy I’ve ever seen.” His raw words are sobering. My lids tighten. I can’t watch him watching me. It’s too intimate. I’ve never bared myself to another human like I am now.

“I wonder if you feel as good as you look.” My thighs tighten, then tremble as his big hands glide up my shins and down to where my whole being is centred. I seem to have forgotten every other sensation, but what is about to happen right there. “Tell me, Miss Reid, how good does your pussy feel?” Thumbs run along either side of my sex, dipping into my wet lips, then massaging upwards again. My breath exits in a loud moan. “Feels that good, huh?”

I blink my eyes open, and Callan is staring so openly at me, right there. He really loves looking at me. His neck works, and his nostrils flare.

“Callan, please.” I don’t get what I want. He continues his lazy exploration, dipping enough to have me squirming for more, but not enough to give me the fullness I so desperately want. I arch my back for more, and he takes that moment to drive his tongue so deeply that I grab his hair on a short cry for support. Rough hands take mine and pin them by my bum pressed into the lounge. His wide shoulders are causing my legs to ache as he takes up the space he needs to access my sex. He moans and nips.

“Callan. God... I.” My teeth sink to my lip as he fucks me deeply with his mouth. His tongue traces along my lips, then he is dragging my clit through his teeth, and I splinter into a thousand pieces. I blink through the myriad of bright colours behind my lids to find him wiping his mouth with his hand, a hand that drops to my own mouth, as wet fingers slide across my lips and his nostrils flare.

“That’s the closest you’ll get to my tongue, so enjoy.” Instinctively, I lick my lips and his chest hollows as I suck his fingers into my mouth. Oh god, this is nothing like my first encounter. Nothing. I didn’t know it could be like this.

“Beautiful.” He grins, pulls his hand away on a pop, and his fingers slide down to my sex. He doesn’t tease or ease in. His fingers drive up, filling me, and I squirm on a high moan.

“Yes,” I cry out as he works his fingers in and out until I’m trembling and trying to reach for him. He wipes his hand all over my sex, so I’m damp with my own juices. His eyes are alight with dark satisfaction, and I know any minute now he is going to take me.

“I’m clean, and I know you are,” he growls.

“You do, how?” I squirm as his fingers curve in and out deliciously. I whimper and pump my hips.

“I checked your medical records. You’re on the pill. I want skin on skin,” he says before dropping to give me one long lick there, causing me to thrash my head.

“Oh god.” I should be bothered he has looked into my life as much as he has, but right now, with pleasure rolling through me, I don’t care.

His mouth disappears, and he is leaning over me.

“Grab your knees,” he growls, lining up. I do as I’m asked, and he slides deeply in one harsh thrust. Holy shit!

I whimper and sob, and he hangs his head low, his mouth agape as I lift to connect my mouth with his, and his hand grabs my throat.

“No,” he spits. “I don’t kiss. Remember that.” He draws back and hammers back in, once, twice, three times. My knees slip free, and he tsks me. “Knees,” he barks.

I hold them tight, and he ploughs back in. A deep ache rides through my stomach, and again, my knees slip free. I can’t hold them. I’m weak with need as he hooks my legs inside the crook of his elbows, positions his hands, and fucks me wildly out in the open. I’m gripping his wrists tightly

to take the brunt of his weight when I spiral out into a climax that fractures my resolve. I scream, and he roars a curse out above before rolling us over in a sweaty mess.

Chapter Twelve

I sit up, pulling the blanket around me like a bath towel. When Callan returns, he has some shorts on, but the rest of him is on full display.

“Did I sleep long?”

“Twenty minutes at most.” He drops into a chair not too far away and stares leisurely across the space at me. So we're back to that.

“Where are my clothes?” They're not where I dropped them, and even my shoes are missing.

“Clothes are an unnecessary item for this stay.” I thought this was a one-time thing. He's had me—now it's over.

I don't want to come across as a sourpuss. Even though my mind is still shaken by my time here, my body is aching with the kind of satisfied pain I've never known.

“What are those, then?” I point to his shorts, and he grins at me. His focus is on me, but the expression on his face is an odd one. I stand with the intent to retrieve my clothes and leave as agreed, but catch him shaking his head and frowning out at the vast ocean. His chest pulls in a deep breath, his cheeks puffing as he blows a short sharp puff of air out, and he drags his detailed hand down his perplexed face. Something is bothering him.

“Come here.” I pad over to him, and when I stop at his bare feet, he pulls me down on a twist so I'm sitting on his lap overlooking the pool and craggy shore. The sea stretches for miles, and the sun is slowly falling past the horizon. If I were with anyone else, I would possibly find this moment romantic, but the circumstances don't really allow for it. I feel stiff sitting here with him. His arms are placed respectfully on the chair arms, and after a few long minutes of difficult silence, a hand moves, and I tense, but he loosely wraps it around my waist. “Relax, Zara.”

“I can't,” I admit feebly. He's a pretty intimidating guy, not to mention virile, and I feel like he is going to pounce any second. He doesn't, but he does begin to massage my shoulder and neck, relaxing me on the spot. I melt into his embrace and groan sleepily as thick fingers dig into my

knotted muscles. He works my neck, pressing firmly, and eases all aches. I hum out my appreciation, soft lips touch the curve of my neck, and I shudder out a little breath. Those hands that have sent me into a relaxed stupor roam around to my chest. The blanket slips away, and he gives my breasts the same attention. His legs shift, and mine are manoeuvred, leaving me exposed. Down one hand goes, and I moan, already anticipating the roar of an orgasm.

“You're incredible,” he tells me, “so responsive, and you're the sexiest woman I ever laid eyes on.” My heart thrums as my head drops back.

“Don't stop now. I'm actually starting to like you,” I pant as his fingers swirl provocatively until I'm whimpering. A dark chuckle flows past my ear, and I can't ignore that delicious tightening at the apex of my thighs.

“Oh, god.” I rock my hips, and Callan's hand drops away. I suck in a ragged breath and try to look back over my shoulder, but he is already lifting me off his lap and tugging me inside. I'm at a half run to keep up with his giant strides when he kicks out the dining chair, puts me in its place and bends me over. “Oomph” I grip the edges and push back when I feel him line up before I'm gifted with more blinding pleasure.

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I'm lying in a big bed with this beast of a man beside me, listening to the rush of waves and the call of birds. I stare at the sun, trying to break through the dark. My need to flee from the life I have created burns hotter than ever. Callan's head is nestled in his hands, arms stretched up on either side of his face, pulling his wide flank on full display. He looks photoshopped, and I sigh quietly, watching him discreetly—the restrained violence in him oddly fascinates me. What drives a man to be so dangerous, so callous, so unforgiving?

My body aches from every minute that has been devoted to me, but my lips remain untouched. I don't like it, but it keeps this to what it is, and it's less intimate this way. But it's the one thing I really want to do. Kiss him.

I want to press my lips to his just as much as I want to slink into the shadows and hide. I know this man can make that happen. Callan lives on the wrong side of the law. He makes his own rules and lives without fear. He's my way out of this. He's the dark I need. This lawless man is my way to a new life. I could almost laugh at my stupidity. I was running from the

one man who can help me. He may be everyone's villain, but he is going to be my saviour.

"I know you're looking at me," he grumbles. His head twists my way, and I fight a slight smile. "Come here." His chin lifts, coaxing me his way. I go, of course, I go. He is spectacular, and I enjoy the attention he seems to want to give me. I climb on his stomach and use my hands to keep me upright as he stares at me lazily, his cold irises taking a leisurely stroll down my naked body.

The sheer hope he could bring to giving me a new life wins, and before I can stop myself, I run my hands up his chest and lift his chin to meet my eyes.

"I need you to make me disappear, Callan," I say quietly. His gaze is neutral. He doesn't move a muscle, no reaction, just that lazy look. I thought I had perfected indifference, but this man is a pro.

"You do, do you?" he drawls, his head twisting to give him the space to look over me in awed assessment.

"Yes," I breathe, uneasy about voicing my deepest desire to such an unpredictable man. I sit back and watch him for some reaction. He barely blinks. His control is as unnerving, and it is unwavering, and his hands glide up my thighs and grip my hips. "Please?" I ask quietly, swallowing a thick lump in my throat.

"Why?"

"Does it really matter?" I frown. His jaw twitches, and I'm so focused on that one little action that I'm not prepared for when he flips us and pins me to the bed. I grunt at his weight, crushing me into the bed, so he shifts, easing up my lungs.

"What are you running from?" he asks sombrely. I expected that question, and I don't blame him, but the less he knows, the better, right?

"Maybe from you?" I grin, earning a marginal smirk.

"Glamming it up no longer any fun?" His weight is a lot for me, but I don't complain. I'm swaddled by him, and despite knowing this man has the strength to snap my neck, I feel unusually safe, too safe. I don't like that either. I want to wrap myself around him and let go of the fear, the past. The calm people experience with the luxury of safety would wash over me. I'd be clear and tranquil like the most serene of seas. Callan may appear calm and collected now, but he is no doubt as dangerous and lethal as a storming sea, volatile and crushing. I can't let myself be caught up in feelings.

“It never was fun,” I admit. “Can you make it happen?” I whisper, staring hopefully at him. I don't care about the cost. I will buy my freedom if I have to. Beg for it.

“I can,” he answers earnestly. I nod, sucking in a deep breath, feeling painfully closer to my goal, shaking. This is it. I'm going to leave this behind me, live for the first time ever. “But I won't,” he enlightens me coolly.

My gaze sharpens, my face a mix of hurt and annoyance.

“Why?” I exclaim. I should have known better. I've given him a snippet of information, an insight, a little clue into who Zara Reid is and dammit if he isn't going to use it to his advantage.

“Because I just got you. I'm not done playing,” he murmurs, dropping his head to nip at my jaw.

“I thought you only took a woman once,” I scoff, irritated that he is manipulating the situation to his advantage. “I'm surprised I wasn't kicked out after you came,” I huff, trying to push him off. He did say one night, but I'm being petulant.

“If you'd been anyone else, you'd be walking back to your hotel right now.” He thrusts, making my mouth slam shut. “I'm quite enjoying fucking London's top model.” He grins wolfishly.

“Do you have to be so crude?” I mutter, trying and failing to ignore his mouth inching towards my breast.

“Yes,” he groans, his mouth now working my nipple. Oh hell, his tongue swirls, then flattens.

“Callan.” Gasping, I try to push against his hands, but he doesn't budge. His tongue swirls once again with intent. “Oh god, wait, no,” I pant. He nips the tight bud, and sparks fly over my skin, tapering right down to between my thighs. I want to slam my legs shut, but the heavy body between them won't allow for it. He sucks hard, and my protest turns to a moan, “Oh, please.”

“Which is it? Wait, please, stop, start?” He lifts his brow, but before I can answer, he sinks deep inside me, chasing the wind right out of my lungs.

“Ah, hell,” he groans. “I'll make you disappear, maybe even see a few stars.” He is pumping in and out with slow, deep thrusts. My wrists held fast, but as soon as he lifts his weight on his arms, my wrists become locked

in place. He rears back and slams deeply, our mouths dropping open on silent cries, which soon turn into a deep moan from me.

“Again,” he warns me, working his neck before he pulls out and then...slam! My eyes slam shut, and a flash of colour bursts behind my lids. Stars.

“Zara,” his demanding tone pulls my eyes open. He rolls his hips, and his face tightens with pleasure. “I feel like I might just lose my control with you.” He narrows his eyes angrily at me. His hips pull away, and I know what’s about to come. I whimper, and he quirks his lips on a smile before slamming back in. My back arches as I cry out. “Problem is, you’ll break before I do.” My vulnerable eyes flash to his, and he smirks darkly before slamming in and out repeatedly. I lose all thought. It’s overtaken with sensations. My nails are digging into flesh, and I’m crying openly at the brutality of him. The pleasure is overwhelming.

My orgasm hits me like a lightning bolt.

“Callan!” I scream, instinctively trying to clutch at him as I shudder out my release, but he holds me fast, watching me vividly as I come apart, sobbing.

He doesn't stop. His hips continue their assault until he is grunting out his release. His head drops, so close to my mouth, and when I think he is about to kiss me, he tilts my face and delicately licks the trail of tears off my cheek before resting his nose in my hair. I hadn't realised I was crying until his tongue touched my skin. My breathing is ragged, and my eyes hot. I'm shaken to the core, disorientated, and painfully vulnerable after voicing my secret to him.

“I may have to revise my one night rule.” He sounds drowsy, his heavy body softens against mine, and his breathing slowly levels out. I feel trapped and out of breath, but I lay still as he naps. His weight is an odd comfort. After a few minutes, his slow deep breaths begin to relax me too, to the point where my own eyes are growing heavy. Exhaustion pulls at me, and I begin to drift, drift away with him to a place I only ever dream of, to a life out of the limelight. A life like his own where he doesn't fear anyone, hide or follow rules. He lives life to his own making, taking what he wants. I wonder what it would be like to be in his shoes for a minute, or at least by his side. The thought unsettles me, and I shift, trying to get away. I need to think, to breathe. He flies off the bed, gun now in hand, and points it at me.

I scream, falling back and crashing onto the floor, as pain ricochets up my spine. I sob as the throbbing ache spreads over my back.

“Fuck!” he roars. “Zara, are you okay?” Worried eyes appear from above the bed. I’m panting, and my back aches. I nod, but we both know I’m not. One false move, and I could be dead. Maybe that would be for the best. I really thought I had a chance to escape. I drop my head in defeat. What the hell am I doing? I have safety, and I’m risking it all for a selfish man who is out for himself.

“I should probably go,” I murmur, twisting to my knees and pushing myself up, wincing at the pain in my back. I’m visibly shaken as hands grip under my arms and lift me onto the bed.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I fell asleep. I... I never fall asleep.” He blinks, and the realisation has him sitting back on his haunches. “Never with anyone.”

The bed dips, and I pull the cover over my bare skin. Shit, my back really hurts. Tears prick my eyes, but I force them away.

“I don’t blame them.” I laugh, trying to find humour, but his eyes are strained. “It’s okay,” I tell him. It’s not. I don’t feel okay. In fact, my heart is fighting to leave my body behind. Blank eyes find mine, and he inhales deeply.

Callan stands and walks around the bed to me.

“Come and have a bath with me.” Now I’m pulling back in shock. It seems such an unlikely thing for him to do that I find myself speechless.

“I hurt my back,” I tell him, as his arms scoop me up, and I’m being carried from the bed, determined footsteps bringing us to the tailored bathroom. Everything is as big as he is.

He deposits me on the counter and fills the bath. I’m too busy looking at my back to see him advancing on me. My eyes are glued to the deep bruise blooming along my spine. I hiss when I touch it and jump, finding Callan a foot away.

“Jesus Christ, will you stop sneaking about.”

“I’m six foot six. I can’t sneak anywhere,” he drawls. He can. He and I both know it. He’s popped up enough times without my knowledge for him to claim otherwise. As if to convey that, I give him a lifted brow. His eyes fall to the bruise through the mirror and his gaze shutters, darkens. I bring his face back to mine. I know it was an accident, but I can tell it’s bothering him. I don’t know how I know, but his reaction just now tells me Callan has

a softer side to him. Not such a big meanie after all. It makes me want to smile widely.

“So, do all your conquests get to bathe with you, or is it just me?” I question, my finger following the lines on this tattoo, and again, I find my eyes drawn to the two hands crossed by the thumbs cupping his neck. That sickening scrawled quote: ‘death by my own hands’ beneath makes my lips twist sadly. I don’t know what overcomes me, but I lean in, and my hands mimic the tattoo. Callan’s hands tighten on my knees, and his breath leaves in one loud gust of air, then I’m looking up into a shivering glare. “What happens if it’s not by your own hand?” I whisper.

He swallows, and my hands feel the thick muscle roll below my palms.

“Everything is about choice and consequence,” he says reflectively.

“I wasn’t given much choice to be here.” I smirk, reminding him how he gatecrashed my shoot.

“But the consequences were worth it.” Callan laughs. My eyes light up at the sound. He leans into the counter, arms rested either side of me, bringing his face close to mine, our eyes burn back at one another. Wordlessly we stare, each taking in every aspect of the other's face.

I suck in a breath. I don’t think I’ve ever been so attracted to another person in all my life.

“You’re ridiculously handsome,” I comment. My hands haven’t moved, and Callan is happy to let me touch him in such a way. His lips twitch, and his eyes drop to my own lips, being chewed purposely between my teeth.

“Thanks,” he says roughly, but genuinely. His nostrils flare, and his fingers twitch on my knees. “I like your hands on my throat,” he admits gruffly. I search his eyes and find that the black is burning up hotter than the sun.

“You do, do you?” I ask as his mouth widens and his eyes sparkle. Callous Callan is slowly disappearing before my eyes, and instead of this dark, mechanical man, a more calm and light-hearted Callan is emerging. I really like that. I like him.

“Here.” He leans past me and gives me two painkillers, and filling a glass with water, he hands me that too and watches as I swallow them down, then plucks the glass from my fingers. “It’s time for you to show me what this little body can do.” His deep voice hits gravel, and I’m being swung up. I thread my legs around his waist, and my hands slip into his hair

to keep me secured. I'm staring at his lips, my mouth tingling to touch them, my lips parting.

"Don't," he threatens. I flinch at the severity of his tone and pout, dropping my head to his shoulder as he steps us into the bath. I reach back and turn the tap off, hissing as my back complains.

His eyes look guilt ridden, and I say the first thing I think to dispel that feeling for him.

"Why don't you like being kissed?"

"Why don't you like modelling?" I roll my eyes and lick my lips when he cups a handful of suds and spreads it over my chest.

"Why a strip club?" I enquire, finding that for the first time, I want the answer. I want to know him. Callan Scott. London's lawless.

"Why not?" His mouth flashes into a wide smile when I glare at him.

"You're difficult to talk to."

"I don't want to talk. I want to fuck." Big hands run down my sides, and I'm being lifted until I can feel him pressing into my slick entrance. I bite my lip at the pinch in my groin, and Callan groans as I slide down. I stay seated, letting myself adjust to the deep ache in my womb. His hands move around, then he is lifting mine and placing them at his neck again. My eyes fly to his as my hair gets threaded into a knot. His cock twitches inside me, and his eyelids flutter closed. Holy shit. He is so turned on right now because of me.

"Do your worst," he growls, chewing his lip. I test him and apply pressure to his throat to leverage myself up. His brow quirks and his lips tilt. "Have I finally met my match?"

Stilling above him, I open my mouth to say something. Does he mean sexually or in general? He doesn't spark me as the romantic or committed type. Callan tilts his head and pinches my nipple.

"We'll see, won't we? Don't you dare hold back on me, Zara. This is just sex." He groans darkly. Sexually then. I pour all of myself into him, my fear, my hurt, my unshed tears—he gets it all and gives all in return.

Chapter Thirteen

The plane tilts to the right, and I look up from the portfolio in my lap. It's pointless trying to work, as all I can think about is last night with Callan. I left before he woke and managed to get back to my hotel to pack and meet with everyone for breakfast before we boarded.

Yawning, I close the portfolio and stare out the window.

"Thought you got an early night?" Samson asks. He's a nice guy, but I suspect he is hoping to spark something up between us. It's not the first time we have worked together, and every time, he has been overly flirtatious and too nice, trying to buy my favour. I twiddle with my pendant necklace and give him my most relaxed look.

I shrug.

"I think I'm coming down with something," I fib. Well, not so much. I think I'm coming down with a case of the feels. Callan is an incredible sexual partner. We have chemistry, a lot of it. But it's more than that. My mind drifts to him covering my face with bath bubbles and me coughing. He was laughing intensely, and before I could get him back, he dunked me under the water. It was so out of character for the big guy that he seemed to shock himself more than me. He is menacing and cold. Everyone fears him, and yet last night, he was the complete opposite. We sat on the beach, him wrapped in a knit throw, me wrapped in him, and picked at some fruit. I was surprised to find he doesn't drink either. I'm pegging that as a control thing like myself.

He told me about a new club he is looking to open. A nightclub. I know he owns two bars, and Skyn is his main focus. But neither really warrants him to be this big badass. I know something deeper is going on. Something illegal. Callan screams illegal, and I just scream when I'm with him.

"What are you smiling at?" I turn, finding Samson eyeing me curiously, his own mouth grinning.

"Sorry, what?"

“You’re grinning, all goofy and shit,” Samson observes with an odd smile on his face.

“I am not,” I spit out and turn back to the window.

“Zara, you actually had a smile on your face, a real one.” I know exactly what he means. I’m so used to smiling for the camera no one ever makes me smile for real. Not unless it’s Oscar or now Callan.

“Just glad to be going home,” I tell him. That’s not entirely true. I have a casting when we land, so I need to get a taxi straight from the airport. I grab a few hours of sleep on the plane, then pick up a salad and eat on the way into London.

I decide I need to freshen up a bit when we arrive at the location, so I pull my case along and slip into the toilet before using the loo. When I open the door, I gape because Callan is leaning against the sinks facing me in the ladies—my face must be a picture.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, poking my head out of the cubicle to see if we are alone. How the hell did he get here so quickly?

“Do you always flee in the early hours?” His hands grasp the edge with enough force to crack the marble surface. His eyes follow my gaze, and he shoves his hands in his pockets.

“When I have a casting, yes,” I tell him. How did he know I was going to be here? Did he follow me? Of course he followed me. He is here, again!

Callan is eyeing me curiously.

“You could have travelled with me.” I step out and wash my hands, not sure how to play this. I thought I had Callan all pegged. Our one night is over. What is he doing here?

“Wouldn’t that be crossing lines? You said one night,” I say quizzically. His frown deepens, and it makes his face more severe. His jawline is more pronounced when he grits his teeth.

“And you’re really okay with that?” It’s him who seems baffled now. I’m certain other women before me have clung on to this man so much so that he’s had to peel their fingertips away before one of his security chucks her from the property as she screams dramatically for him. I’m being over the top, but the thought makes me grin inwardly.

“It’s what we agreed on.” What he made me agree on. Demanded. Another of his rules.

“And if we hadn’t agreed to that, what would you want?” He is staring at me openly. His appraisal is mixed in with genuine interest, as he is

anticipating my response. He looks so calm, so blasé, yet he is here, chasing me again around the globe.

“I want to go to work,” I say calmly. I don’t want to risk angering him, but he looks to be getting angrier and angrier in my presence by the minute.

Those big hands are back on the countertop.

“I thought you wanted to disappear,” he murmurs darkly. The door swings open, and I fly around, but the timid girl standing in the doorway gapes at us.

“Leave,” Callan instructs harshly. She does, and I spin to face him again. What on earth is happening right now?

“What do you want, Callan?” I mutter, trying not to think too much into this. He searches my eyes, and I hear the distinct sound of his teeth grating, making the hair on my neck stand up.

“Stalin will escort you home,” he informs me. My mouth drops open to disagree, but in three quick strides, his long thick legs have him pushing free of the loos. Urgh, men!

~

I’m not the only top model here, and when Monica Omal takes a seat opposite me, I groan inwardly. Luckily, Oscar calls me, and I spend a few minutes on the phone to him, and shortly after, I’m escorted through to another room.

“Good luck!” Monica sings falsely. She has never liked me, and I have always remained polite, but after my surprise visit from Callan, I can’t be bothered with politeness. I ignore her and follow the assistant. I hear Monica mutter how rude I am, but given that she hasn’t wished anyone else good luck, I’m assuming the others have picked up on how insincere she is. It’s no secret she despises me. This day is turning out to be pretty crap.

It’s nearing midnight before I leave the casting, and when I do, I’m too tired to argue with Stalin. I’m trudging my way to his car when Monica comes strolling past, her hand held out as if to give me something.

“Here, you left your manners.” Her mouth snaps into a false smile, and Stalin raises his eyes to me. I shake my head and let him take my bag.

“Good night, Monica,” I drone. God, what a miserable cow.

“We must be doing well. Got yourself a driver, have we?” Her eyes take him in with distaste. “Mafia lend you him?” she chortles, giving Stalin the once over. I continue to ignore her. “I did wonder what those bruises on

your knee were from?" she scoffs smugly. I eye her and shake my head. Has she nothing better to do? I feel sorry for her. "It's rude to ignore people," she calls harshly, as I slide into the car.

"It's also rude and bitchy to insinuate my client's talents are based on how tough you think her knees are and not on her professional achievements and staggering success, yet here we all are." Stalin's voice is dark, deadly. "Your own look rather worn. What's the saying: takes one to know one?"

Monica's eyes pop wide.

"How dare you!" she squawks, tugging at her hem to cover her reddened knees. Gross.

"I think I noticed a pimp around the corner. He may have availability." He points with his meaty hand into the dark. A gold tooth flashes in the night as he gives her a bone-chilling smile. "Or if you're feeling more adult, feeling brave enough, you could always come and hang with us mafia."

Stalin nods to the car. She storms off, and I gape at him when he gets behind the wheel. A laugh bursts free, and I'm mopping up tears. I know for a fact she will be worse than ever now, but that was just priceless. I want to go and hug the mountain, but instead, I lean back into the seat, sighing gratefully. I'm glad today is over.

I blink and capture a big, suited chest before my eyes roll shut. I moan and twist into something, smelling a familiar and dark scent. It's a huge comfort, and I inhale it as I snuggle down and hum out my satisfaction.

~

"Zara?" My eyes feel too heavy, but when I hear my name for a second time, I prise them open and blink in confusion to find Callan staring down at me. "You've been asleep for nearly fourteen hours," he tells me. I blink again. Fourteen. What's he talking about? "Did anyone give you anything?" he asks this time, trying to bring me round. I'm becoming more alert, more awake.

"No, I'm just tired." I rub at my eyes and yawn. My voice is croaky.

"Are you sure?" He lifts my eyelid, and I pull back, covering my face.

"Don't do that. I will look ugly." I laugh, and he smirks, but checks me over once more. "What time is it?" I'm groggy, and for the first time in forever, I have a dull headache on waking. I rub the sore area, and this only fuels his concern.

“It’s nearing two p.m.” He gives me a pointed look when I gasp in shock. “Are you sure you didn’t eat or drink anything whilst you were there?”

I shake my head.

“No, I always take my own food and drink,” I say. “I work long days. I’m due a day off,” I tell him, then scoot off the bed. “Shit, I have a shoot!” Callan is blocking me and pushes me back down on the bed.

“You can’t be serious. You’ve slept for England. You look exhausted.”

“Probably all the sex,” I snap. He doesn’t get to order me around. I stand again, but his palm knocks me back. I give him my angriest look, and we stare it out for a moment.

“Call your agent and cancel.”

“I can’t!”

“I thought you wanted out? Why the panic?” Callan rubs at his big chest, and my eyes follow. I stall and look up at him and frown. It’s habit—a habit of having to rush to meet everyone’s demands, to keep myself busy. I give him a resolute look.

“Okay, I need my phone,” I mention, looking around for my bag.

“I’ll ask Edward. He had your things.” Callan removes his suit jacket and rolls his shirt up on each arm.

I nod and feel myself relax a little. I hit a mental brick wall last night, and I’m exhausted. I finally manage to look past the view that is Callan Scott and find the expanse of London’s skyline set out before I push up from the bed.

"Callan, this view is incredible." I slip past him, enjoying the feel of his hand brushing along my back. I’m naked—no doubt his doing. I pick up what looks like one of his t-shirts and pull it over my head, padding to the window and staring out, tugging the hem down. A palm flattens on the glass above me, then another presses to my stomach.

“I’ve recently found another view that has taken my fancy at the moment.” My heart stutters. *At the moment*, I remind myself. This is just a passing infatuation for him. I’m a novelty. It’s a good thing. I don’t want to tie myself to anyone. I need to keep all avenues open for when I fall off the edge of the world. I’ll be a mystery, the 'do you remember' person until I’m forgotten. Just like I want.

Clearing my throat, I try my hardest not to fixate on his reflection and concentrate on the view before me.

“Lucky view.”

“She certainly is.” His hand creeps down until he is cupping me. It’s hot between my thighs, and when he doesn’t move or pleasure me, I realise it’s an ownership of sorts—him holding me so brazenly in front of the world. My eyes lift and meet his in the clear glass, and his hand flexes.

“I had Edward make us some lunch,” he says suddenly, stepping away and putting distance between us. I turn, finding him already walking away out of his bedroom. I follow him down a hallway, past further bedrooms and a family bath, before we’re in an opulent living area. It’s all very masculine: dark wood, dark furnishings. Fit for a sinful male. It’s a luxurious cave of dark decadence. I look around for someone else, this Edward? I don’t find anyone because we are alone. Two places are set at the breakfast bar, and Callan goes to the fridge and pulls two salads out. He pulls a loaf of fresh olive bread off the side and brings it over. He doesn’t cut it nicely, but tears some off and bites into it with a wink at me. I smirk and drop my gaze as I pick at my meal. I don’t know why I am here or what is going on. Callan made it abundantly clear he doesn’t tolerate a woman past one night.

Greece was pretty intense. I enjoyed myself a lot with him. I’ve never given myself to someone like that or given anything to anyone else, but I don’t want to be caught up in something I can’t get out of. It’s evident everything is at his pace, for his benefit. Never mind the consequences to others.

“Why am I here, Callan?” I bite the inside of my cheek. I’m forever asking him such questions.

“I want you here.” It’s as simple as that. He wants, he gets. “I told you, I like looking at you.” He pops another chunk of bread into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully, his eyes holding me. I stare into their endless depths in the hope something will come forward and offer me an insight into this man.

I hum around my fork, refusing to meet his gaze again. He has the ability to read the most robotic of people. “And how long do you plan on this phase lasting?” I say softly, keeping my face neutral. I don’t want him privy to all my thoughts and feelings.

“You’re not getting attached already, are you?” He seems playful, but there is a keen stare in his eyes that suggests a more severe emotion below the surface.

“On the contrary, I’m eager to get back to my idea, or normal.” I stab an olive and shove it into my mouth. I bring my head up and finally show him how serious I am. I’m done with him plucking me up from wherever I am.

The skin around his eyes tightens ever so slightly, and if I weren’t looking, I would never have noticed it.

“You don’t like normal. You want to disappear,” he reminds me coldly. I’ve annoyed him. Good.

“That’s right, I do, and you’ve made it clear you’re not interested in assisting me with that, so I want to know how much of *my* time you require before I can start making it happen myself,” I punctuate slowly.

“You’re hiding something,” he states.

“Aren’t we all?” I scoff.

“I’m an open book.” He holds out his arms, and my sarcastic laugh surprises us both.

“More like a notebook with nothing inside.” I jab my fork forcefully into some chicken and fill my mouth to avoid any further words coming out.

“I gave you plenty of signals to read the other night.” He prods lazily at his own food, less aggravated by our conversation than I am. Yes, I learnt he likes sex. A lot.

“This apartment probably set you back a cool fifteen million plus,” I say confidently, and he raises his brow, enjoying my irritation. “There is no way, no matter how exclusive your clubs are, that you bring in that kind of revenue to be slumming it in a place like this.” I stab my fork again, imagining it’s his arm. God, he is so infuriatingly calm.

“And?”

“You’re dirty.” I shrug. “Why else would I ask you to make me disappear,” I tell him, forking up another mouthful, hoping he fills the silence.

“You should count yourself lucky that I took enough interest in you to give you the opportunity to ask such a thing,” he tells me. His tone is colder than before, and I try to remind myself to play this safe. Callan isn’t the kind of person you piss off, but his arrogance has my annoyance three sixty-ing into anger.

My fork hits the surface with a loud clatter.

“My god,” I laugh before looking at him with false gratitude, “thank you.” I slap my hand to my chest. “Thank you for fucking me. How can I ever repay you?” I push my plate away and hop down. What a prick!

“You think because you spread those legs, I will just,” his fingers snap, and I flinch, stopping where I am, “make you disappear? A famous model? Your face is everywhere. Your name is on everything. You’re asking on a whim for me to give you something people pay *hundreds of thousands* for.”

I will pay. I never suggested I wouldn’t.

“So that’s what you do?” My hands are on my hips, and I’m staring crossly as he strides towards me. I force myself not to react to the huge man stomping angrily at me until my neck is craned and I’m staring up at him. Even angry, he is crazily beautiful.

“I never said that,” he growls, inky lashes narrowing around his freezing cold stare. “In my line of work, it pays to know these things,” he pushes out through gritted teeth.

“And what exactly is this line of work?” I quip.

“You’re really starting to piss me off.”

“Wonderful, can I leave then?” I snap. With his jaw clenched and his fist knuckle-white, I expect him to throw me out, but instead, I’m swung over his shoulder. My stomach repels, and I bite my tongue to stop my lunch from coming back up. Callan powers us back through the apartment and drops me on the bed. My ankle gets yanked, and I slide along the covers before his hands hit his trousers. As soon as his cock bursts free, he groans out in relief. He’s huge, and the thick tip is already glistening. He grabs the collar of his t-shirt and rips it apart before spreading my legs roughly.

“No, but we can continue this argument a different way.” He’s suddenly pressing me into the mattress and surging upwards. I snap off the bed with a pleading moan until his hand finds my hair, and he takes me with abandon.

Chapter Fourteen

I've seen more stars these past few nights than I have my whole life. I'm staring out into the dark, star-strewn sky, wondering how I got in this mess or how I get myself out. Callan is panting roughly. We're slick with sweat, and my legs are jellified. I can't move, so I don't. I stay still when he slips free and rolls over. I want to be cross at him for taking me as he does, but I feel so alive. Free of the constraints of life. I'm floating in the stars. Just like he promised I would be.

"You are without a doubt the most infuriating woman I ever met." He swings himself up and looks over his shoulder at me. My petite foot kicks out, swiftly clipping his toned arse. Our furious session has done nothing to cool either of us off. We are still brimming with anger at one another.

"And you're a massive twat," I declare brazenly. I'm still out of breath. I push myself up and stomp past him to search for my phone. I find it along with my other belongings and get dressed, despite being sweaty and gross. I shove my feet in my heels and walk towards a wide door.

"It's locked," he tells me broadly.

"Then unlock it."

"You're not leaving." Callan watches me in all his naked glory, and that alone makes me even angrier.

"And you can't keep me here!" I yell, shoving my finger in his direction.

"Are you due on? You're awfully mardy?" he queries, smirking when I growl under my breath.

I look at him in sheer confusion.

"Why am I really here, Callan? What's going on?" I drop into a wide chair and look up at him, standing butt naked, completely unabashed.

"You're here because I intend on fucking you. A lot," he delivers calmly. When my mouth pinches into a grim pout, he moves towards me and sighs heavily. He tucks my hair behind my ear. "I prefer the more sated Zara," he informs me lightly.

“You’re such an arrogant pig,” I relent, flicking a disgruntled look at him, my voice petulant. What I really want is to catch him off guard with a smart retort like he does me and shake some sense into him.

His gaze does a wide sweep over my face before it rests on my angry eyes. He seems thoughtful, his mind whirling with his next words.

“Your two options include working yourself to the bone or—”

“If you even dare say anything about your bone, I will smack you.” I’m shaking angrily. His laugh vibrates around the whole apartment—it carries and carries, a dark wave of humour mocking me.

“I wish I fucking had now.” He wipes his eyes on his shoulder when I realise I’ve reduced him to tears of laughter.

“You’re not funny. It’s not funny!” I snap, trying my utmost not to be infected by his twinkly eyes and wide smile.

He sobers up and shrugs at me. His sigh is low.

“Not to you, maybe. You think I’m a prick for being so open. I like fucking you. It’s not a crime. You’re exhausting yourself with work, and given how much I make you scream, it’s a no brainer which is the more beneficial option for you.” Wow, he seriously cannot help himself.

“You have zero respect for women.” I really thought he had a nicer side after Greece. Or is it just me he doesn’t respect?

Callan shrugs, indifferent to my claim, and leans back against the wall.

“The only women I’ve ever respected were taken from me. Until I meet someone worth my while, I intend on giving those before her the respect they deserve,” he concludes roughly. Hurt pinches at my gut. So I’m not worthy of him. I’m just another pawn. I swallow a ball of acid in my throat. What women, I wonder? I blink up at him curiously, but his frown deepens, warning me away from the topic. He’ll never open up to me, anyway.

“And I’m supposed to be grateful for the lack of respect you’re showing me?” I really don’t want to cry, but heat pricks at my eyes, and I know my mouth has turned down. Callan frowns at me.

“You say that like you’re giving me any. You’re using me no less than I am you.” His words sting, but only because they are true. I’m still here because I want him to free me from this life, to escape the light, and find the shadows again. I expect nothing more to come of this than what is on offer. I have nothing to give in return.

“If you want to get to work and slug your arse for those self-possessed little pricks, be my guest. If not, feel free to get undressed, and I’ll ensure

you're more relaxed within the next hour.”

~

I was expecting a shower and two blinding orgasms, so the masseuse who worked my back was the perfect surprise. Callan does, in fact, have a soft side. That's why it infuriates me all the more when he is such an arse. I've contacted my agent, and she has managed to move the shoot to first thing. I want to keep my work life moving along until I take the step to call it a day. Callan has left me in the living room whilst he works in his office, and Stalin has been to collect some things from mine.

Oscar has called me in a panic. He was at mine when Stalin arrived, so I gave him a quick rundown of the past few days, purposefully leaving Greece out. I don't want him to know just how much has been going on behind his back.

“You're sleeping with him!” he exclaims in a shrill note that has me questioning his sexuality.

“Shush, but yes.” I check over my shoulder, grateful I am alone.

“Fucking hell,” he huffs, “what's he like? He hasn't hurt you, has he?” He sounds genuinely worried about me.

“I'm not doing this, Oscar.” I laugh. I can't bring myself to discuss this with him, despite having to listen to his conquests.

“Z, you're never involved with anyone, and the one guy you do give it up for is shady as fuck,” he states, concerned.

“I didn't give it up. I was with someone before him,” I remind him softly.

“Yeah, one guy, that puny toad who blabbed about you to the press,” he snaps. I flinch at the reminder of that one dreadful encounter that was merely a means to money for the shallow fortune hunter I gave my virginity to.

“That was a long time ago. It's forgotten.” *Just like I will be.* I sigh and flick the channel, finding a documentary to watch.

“He had his men beat me up, Zara.” He sounds hurt, and I bite my lip, feeling like I have betrayed our friendship. “He's not a good person. At least reassure me he is being good to you?”

“I know, I'm sorry. It's just. I can't explain it. I feel so chained to this life, and with him, even for a short while, I'm free,” I croak.

“I had no idea you felt like that, Z.” His voice softens, and I tuck my legs beneath me and chew my lip.

“I’m constantly watched, Oscar. You know I hate that,” I say. I know he is scared for me, and I want to put his mind at rest. “He hasn’t hurt me,” I say, unconsciously leaving a ‘but’ to hang over my words.

Oscar jumps on it straight away.

“But?”

“He’s rough,” I admit quietly.

“Who’s rough?” I jump a mile when Callan appears by the edge of the sofa. I cut the call and stare up at him from low on the seat. How long has he been there? What did he hear?

“Shit,” I laugh, “you made me jump.” He lifts his chin for me to go to him. I don’t know what he expects of me, but I do as asked and run my hands over his shoulder. He hoists me up. “You’re rough,” I confess, looking straight into his eyes.

He nods the words over and gives me a little smile, a private one that I reciprocate. Callan is unashamedly rough and so damn passionate in bed. He is raw and gentle, rough and slow, calculated and hard. I’m getting flustered just thinking of him.

“Who was on the phone?”

“Oscar.”

His nostrils flare, and he squares his jaw at my admission.

“What’s the deal with you two?” he questions. His palms cup my arse and hips, giving them a squeeze.

“Nothing, we’re friends.” Is he jealous? He sounds jealous? Happiness rises like a wave washing over me.

He scoffs. He really doesn’t like Oscar.

“I don’t trust the guy. Have you been intimate with him?”

I pull back, affronted and shudder.

“God no, we’re just close. He’s my closest friend.” I’m trying to hold in a laugh, and thankfully, I do because I doubt Callan Scott would take kindly to me mocking him.

He nods.

“Go grab yourself a shower. We’re going for dinner,” he delivers, dropping me to my feet.

“I can’t. I faked a bug.” I drone sarcastically. How can he have forgotten?

“It'll be private. Go, get ready,” he instructs. His phone rings, and I'm left to get on with his demands whilst he talks quietly, heading back to his office.



An hour later, I'm spritzing myself with perfume. I've got a deep claret strapless dress on, and my lips match. I've straightened my hair into a sleek bob and drawn enough eye-liner around my eyes to write an essay. I'm sliding into my heels when Callan strolls in, all in black. I've never seen him wear anything else but black and the odd white shirt.

“Ready?” I nod and follow him out of the penthouse down to his car. Stalin is already in the Range Rover, waiting with the engine running. I always felt I was waited on, but this is just something else. We each get in, and I sit mostly in silence whilst Callan taps away on his phone. I don't recognise the location, but I soon register that is because we are arriving via the service entrance. Callan helps me out, and we walk through a series of corridors until we are at a lift. It takes us straight up to an empty corridor. Callan takes my wrist, and we walk down until we reach a door. It slides open, and inside is a private dining area. A big window overlooks a myriad of people below, eating, drinking and laughing. I stop, worried that we will be seen. Hands cup my hips.

“No one can see up here. A friend owns this place. We will be undisturbed.”

On a slight nod, I follow him inside. The walls are velvety smooth, and the deep rich tones give it an indulgent feel. Candlelight is the only light on offer, and my breath stutters because this is oddly romantic. Callan holds out my chair, and I slip in, grateful we will be seated a few feet apart. The table is wide, a rich mahogany wood to match the coal-like stone floor.

“What's the occasion?” I ask. There is a bottle of water sitting in ice, and Callan pours us both one before he takes his seat.

“You are,” he enlightens me, “your request led to intrigue, which led to a lot of deadends and obvious curiosity, and the more curious I've become, the more I keep asking myself why.” He lifts his glass and turns it, watching a droplet pool over the edge down onto his thumb before lifting his gaze back to mine. “Why does such a highly paid, well sought out and respected model want to disappear? So, Zara Reid, this is all for you. You've got two hours to win my favour and make me change my mind about you.

Otherwise, you can kiss your request goodbye.” His words, although softly spoken, are as lethal as a sharpened blade. There is a threat in his tone. Either way, I’m not leaving this room without a confession of sorts. To really drive his meaning home, he places his gun on the table, and I clench my hands in my lap. My lungs expel all my air, and I find myself feeling less confident and more like the twelve-year-old I was all those years ago. Callan is like a dog with a bone. If I walk now, he will still dig and dig, even if it only leads to scraps. He will move mountains and rivers to find out everything because this is more about sating his own curiosity than helping me. I could sit here and lie, make up some elaborate story, but he will follow it, and when that comes to a deadend, he will be straight back to me, more pissed off, more determined.

I’m in too deep with him now to walk away. I deduce. Should he be able to help me, he will to his best ability. I can trust in that. I lift the glass of water, hating that my hand is shaking. I take a sip, wetting my dry throat.

“I angered some questionable people,” I admit slowly, my mind racing back to remember those terrible events. “I’m on the clock. I have enough money to live on, but I need to disappear for good.” I’m shaking as my mind drags me back, back to the dark, back to the pain. It’s a trauma that grips me when I allow myself to think or voice it.

Dust, thick and gritty, sticks to the roof of my mouth and batters my lungs. I’m wheezing and crying hysterically. We’re going to die. They’re going to kill him. My lungs are burning. I cough, but each deep staggering breath pulls more dirt and grime into my throat. It claws its way down my windpipe, and my eyes stream with the effort to breathe. I need help. We’re going to die. Somebody has to save us.

My father begs for his life, for mine. A low wail exits my mouth. His fear travels to me, and I’m sobbing against the cold floor.

“Shut up!” A heavy boot hits my jaw, and I’m flying back, crunching into a post, my face on fire. The pain is dazing.

“No, please, stop,” my father yells, his deep, raspy voice wavering with tears. “She had nothing to do with this. I’m begging you, let her go.” His tear-stricken face moves to me. “It’s okay,” he reassures me. I cling to my father’s deep olive eyes, praying silently that we make it out of here alive, but something about the sickly look in these men’s eyes tells me we’re going to die. When someone moves on my left, my head snaps around, and any reassurance dries up like my throat.

“You stole from me, lied to me, Monroe, you piece of shit. Now I steal something from you,” the man spits furiously, and his anger rings out through the abandoned warehouse, his accent unrecognisable to my uneducated ears. Who are these people? My father would never lie or steal. He’s a good man. I want to scream, but I’m too scared.

My face is plastered to the floor, and I slow my breathing, trying to calm myself. I stare at the blurred feet, moving about in a scuff. An array of male voices attacks my ears, and before I can search for my father once more, I’m being hauled up by my hair. I scream as each strand threatens to leave my scalp. I hold my hands out for my father, but he is held down in a chair, his face a bloody mess. He is wheezing too, his chest rising in short, sharp painful pants.

“Quit it, you little bitch.” I’m slapped around the face with such force I go dizzy, and my head hangs limply. “Maybe I should show your little girl all about the birds and the bees, compensation for your treachery. An early introduction into our business.”

“No, god, no, she’s twelve, she’s a child.” I blink at my father, who is as bloodied and broken as I am, and he mouths, ‘I’m sorry’. I close my eyes as a fresh wave of hot tears slip over my cheeks and soak my face.

“You fucked with the wrong man!” The guy roars in my ear. “Strip her,” he instructs with a careless demand. My father flaps about like a fish, his body snapping about crazily as he cries out, pleading with these monsters. A few men call out, struggling with my father’s desperate plea to get to me. He wrenches himself up and fights against the men as his panic for my safety aids him in overpowering them. I feel the cold air on my limbs, and then my father is grabbing me. He runs a few short feet, and I’m falling back down a dark hole with a high scream.

“Run, run, Olivia!” he screams. I land with a painful thud and look up to my father’s tearful gaze. “I love yo-”

BANG!

I cry out as blood splatters my face and I flinch, knowing that the one person who was able to protect me is no longer here to help. A sob wracks my body, and fear tears through me. My feet move of their own accord, and then I’m running, running for my life.

“Get her. She can’t live. We will get you, bitch, no matter how long it takes. You’ll die!”

“Zara, who did you anger?” Callan’s harsh words bring me back around, and I blink at him, trying to clear my mind. I’m panting, my hands gripping the table for support.

“I don’t know who. It was a long time ago now.” I had never seen those men in my life. I wish to never lay eyes on them again. But I remember every violent detail of their faces.

“How long?” He lifts a glass of water and takes a sip.

“I was a child, twelve,” I confess shakily. He nods this over before leaning back in his chair.

“So you’re collateral.” He has me pegged within seconds. Of course he does, as if a small child could purposely do such harm to such bad men. “These people, what were they like?”

“Bad,” I say. “I don’t know who they are, but I know they intend to come for me.” I frown down at my own glass. No matter how long it takes.

“So they have contacted you?” he casually asks, taking a timely sip and relaxing back in his chair.

“I received a bouquet of dead flowers a year after I was signed with Miranda’s agency. The note was simple, but to the point. I know they will come for me.”

“What did it say?” Callan’s finger roams the rim of his glass, but his eyes are on mine, hard, intrigued.

Sucking in a breath, I force myself to say the words that have haunted me since.

“You will only be famous for so long.” My voice never wavers, but a pained whisper is all I can spare.

“You’re on borrowed time, and instead of hiding, you put yourself in the spotlight. Why put such an easy target on yourself?” Heavy fists hit the table with a distinctive thud. I jump at his aggressiveness. Why is he so cross with me?

“It’s not easy. I was more accessible in the dark, easier to cover up. This way, too many people know me, too many people will notice, so I’m too hard to get rid of. They admitted as much in their note,” I snap loudly. I feel stupid all of a sudden, vulnerable. I swallow and fight the urge to tuck my hair behind my ears, something I do when I’m nervous.

He contemplates what I’ve said. “It is a smart move,” he says, meaning it, “you’re a brave woman, Zara.” My chest fills with his praise.

“I’m done playing this role. I want a new life.” I say fiercely.

“How do I know you’re not playing a role now?” Maybe I should ask him the same thing?

“Because I have nothing to gain from telling you any of this. In fact, it makes me more vulnerable. You’re another person who knows, another link, another person to use this against me. For all I know, you could blackmail me.” I shrug, frustrated that he would think such a thing. Imagine making something this extreme up—for what, attention? I suddenly worry he will blackmail me. He owes me nothing, and I know Callan is the kind of man to keep his friends close and his enemies closer. He will take what he can and use it to his own advantage.

“You believe they will hurt you?” he murmurs as he swirls the glass in his fingers.

“They shot my father right in front of me.” My mouth turns down. “I escaped because of him. I’m on their wanted list.” I’m rubbing at my temples, trying to repel the sickening images pouring back in. “As soon as the world is bored of me, they will make their move.”

“I found no mention of your father’s name or a mother, and no mention of you, in fact, before you were sixteen.” That was when I was spotted by my agent: that was the day I became Zara Reid. It was pure luck that I’d lived unscathed in the shadows—sheer pure and exhausting luck.

Chapter Fifteen

“That’s because Zara isn’t my real name,” I confess with a dry swallow. The tightly constructed wall around me begins to break, another piece chips away, and my vulnerability is open for his taking, and take he will. I’m as terrified now as I was all those years ago.

His nod suggests he suspected as much.

“I need details, Zara.” His drink hits the table, and his thumb begins a leisurely roll around the glass rim before he sucks a droplet from his thumb.

“I’ve given you details,” I argue lightly.

“Your father’s name. I need to know who I’m up against.” He grits his teeth, his cheeks hollowing out, and I can tell he is trying to be patient with me. I’ve not spoken his name in so long, not even whispered my own, let alone allowed myself the luxury to think of it.

“Anthony Monroe,” I say, pride filling my wobbly voice. Callan’s eyes widen, but he schools his expression, and I stand from the table in a rush. It was slight, but I still saw it nonetheless. “You know something!” I accuse. “You knew my father,” I say in a pained croak. I’ve long since accepted that my father was involved with some immoral people. The ‘why’ is still a mystery to me.

“I knew *of* your father,” he stands, too, “you’re Olivia Monroe.” Callan, for once, looks taken aback. No longer are his features locked into a neutral mask. His frown pulls his brows together, and a deep v forms between his eyes. He’s trying to work this all out. His shrewd eyes move furiously, trying to filter and connect it all.

“No, I’m Zara Reid,” I say with emphasis. “How did you know my father?” I demand hotly.

“I didn’t know him, Zara. I know *of* him. He was killed eleven years ago. It was covered up: burnt-out warehouse, gas leak. He was held accountable for the fire.” He reels the information off as if he read it in the headlines yesterday.

“He didn’t do it!” I cry. My mind is back in that place. I know they burnt it to the ground.

“I know, come here.” I shake my head and lean on the chair forcefully, trying to rid my mind of those final moments. Callan walks purposefully to me and sweeps me up, taking me to his own seat. I want to argue, but I don’t. Sitting in his lap, I wipe the tears away quickly before he sees. I breathe out a steadying breath to get my emotions in check. I don’t want to be that scared little girl again.

“Everyone thinks you’re dead. Your father’s name became mud after the fire. He killed his own daughter and himself too,” he tells me, reciting the papers. I feel sick to think people believed such ill of my father. He was a good man, a good man caught in a dangerous game. I understand that when he says ‘everyone’, he means everyone lawless enough to rub shoulders with those despicable men who want me dead. Olivia Monroe was a no-one, the innocent daughter of accountant Anthony Monroe: motherless and supposedly murdered by her father.

“But I’m not.” I shudder. I could be. It’s only a matter of time—they’ve bided it for long enough. Instinct tells me they are becoming restless, and restless men make dangerous men, just like the one comforting me now. I don’t know what set him on this path, but I doubt he was ever dragged from his bed in the middle of the night at gunpoint and thrown in the boot of a car to be used as bait against his own father. I suspect if he knows who my father is, he also knows my mother left us when I was a baby—the staid life of Anthony Monroe and parenthood not to her standards.

“You’ve been hiding in plain sight all this time.” He shakes his head in awe. “Your father was in with some pretty nasty people, and they are the ones who leaked information about your death. Does the name Santino or Ramis Yovenko mean anything to you?” he asks softly. His kindness isn’t for my benefit. He wants me to divulge information, but I don’t know any more than I’ve already told him.

I shake my head and ask the only thing I can at this moment in time, “What do they mean to you?” I look up at him and find him back to the cool, impassive man he was when I first met him.

“Nothing good. I suspect they faked your death so there would be no connection between you, your father, and them, and they are sitting in wait for you. You were clever to carve this life for yourself.” I know that much. “As soon as you feel comfortable enough to leave your podium, you’re

walking into their hands, Zara. I need time to execute this. Is there anything you're not telling me?" he asks, searching my gaze for a lie. I shake my head. All I know is what happened that night. I know nothing else about Santino and Ramis. Hearing their names for the first time leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Why are you helping me?" I fidget with the lapels of his suit, not quite meeting his eyes.

"It doesn't come free," he delivers, setting me back on my feet, "no more crying. You're stronger than this." He grips my hair at the nape of my neck and levels me with a hard stare. "Don't ruin my opinion of you," he quips on a raised brow, pulling a reluctant smile from me.

I pull at the necklace my father gave to me. I need his strength in a moment like this.

"You're not exactly turning out to be the big bad wolf Oscar professed you to be," I remark. The wait staff comes in to take our order, but I haven't even looked at the menu. I duck my head as Callan halts them, and they leave as quickly and quietly as they came. Callan and I are feet apart, and we remain quiet until they leave. If they recognise me, they don't show it, but I suspect Callan will have ensured they are paid enough to keep quiet. He lifts me onto the table and steps between my thighs, lifting my dress gently as he moves in.

"Why? Am I not rough enough for you?" His voice has dropped an octave, and when he leans in and bites my neck, I hum out a sigh.

His hands grip my thighs as he brings his head back up to stare at me.

"I never said that. So what will it cost me to have your help?" I query, searching his gaze. I want to put things into motion and get the wheel to freedom moving.

"Lie down." His soft instruction has my stomach clenching. I do as asked and lower slowly. "Lift up," he taps my hip and my knickers are removed quickly, "put them in your mouth." His deft fingers hold my knickers just above my face.

"I'm not putt—" I'm halfway sitting up when he flattens me with force to the table. His thumb pulls my lower jaw down, and my flimsy knickers get shoved past my lips.

"You're noisy," he tells me, his lips twisting into a smug smile.

"What's the catch?" I muffle around the lace. Callan laughs deeply, and I'm tugged to the end of the table, my arse cheeks nestled in his big hands. I

have a moment of warning when his breath hits my inner thigh before he is sweeping his tongue up my sex, and my head bumps the table on a low moan.

“This is the catch,” he tells me between licks. His fingers join his tongue, and I’m soon writhing on the hard wooden surface. When my eyes open, he is standing over me, watching me come apart. “I want you for one month, no questions, no excuses. You’re mine for a month.” His fingers curl up as his thumb works in deep circles, and my hips fly off the table, my cry swallowed up by damp knickers. A month of hot sex—it’s barely a hardship. I nod in agreement as his fingers pump in and out, gently prolonging my climax.

“Good, you move in tonight,” he says boldly.

“What!” I choke on the material and spit it out in shock. I’m still gasping for air when Callan kneels to drop a kiss on my throbbing sex. As soon as he is at the right position, my heel hits his shoulder, halting him. He looks up lazily, bemused by my action. “You never mentioned moving in,” I state. His eyes drop back between my thighs, and he swallows a smile.

His black eyes are sharp and intense on mine.

“I just did. Are we still in agreement?” I gape at his stark handsome profile and the dark lines snaking up his neck, the cold, fearless gaze and intimidating way he carries himself. When he adjusts his cufflinks, I see those tattoos poking out. He is such a far cry from the kind of man I thought I would be with—not that we are together, but I never considered fooling around with such an unruly man. All these years, I pictured myself hidden away with some quiet and reserved man who would make me just as inconspicuous as he was, yet the only one I can think about is too big to go unnoticed and reputedly dangerous.

“Zara, I need an answer. You either come home with me now, or this is goodbye.” My chest heaves. I sit up and slip off the table, pulling my dress into place. I’m staring at the black buttons on his black shirt, chewing my lip furiously. I run the risk of becoming too involved with this man if I agree to his terms, but the alternative could cost me my life. The only question is, can I live with heartache?

“Okay,” I sigh, giving in to him, giving in to more heartache.

“Good, let’s order.”

It’s been an exhausting evening. My emotions are everywhere, and when we sit in the back of the car, I’m surprised when Callan takes my hand in

his and drops our threaded fingers in his lap, the other tapping on his phone. I'm a bag of nerves and confusion on the way back, but I strip it all away, telling myself I have to do this to get free of the invisible restraints around my neck. Giving myself to a man like Callan Scott is probably the easiest thing I've ever done, even if, in principle, it goes against everything I believe. I've already slept with him, so it's not like he randomly propositioned me. We have already been intimate, and that was no strings too. This is a means to an end.

We remain silent on the journey back. The partition is down, and Stalin is humming to some music so I try to focus on that. When we pull up beside the private elevator, Callan slides out and waits for me to exit the car. My heart is picking up, beating quicker and quicker. It's dawning on me what I've agreed to, and oddly, I'm anticipating the small amount of time he has extended to me. I'm enjoying this man's company, his devotion, and his quick tongue. I'm enjoying being around him too much.

~

It's already been a week, and I'm aching all over. His sexual appetite is shocking, and I hate to admit it, but it's concerning how much I ache for him. I'm falling asleep in a sexed-up haze and being woken up in the most pleasurable ways. Work is one big blur, and everything else is becoming very much about Callan. My week is arranged by him, and although I am still picking up work, Callan is utilising my free time to meet his needs.

"Why are we here?" I ask, both irritation and curiosity in my tone. I'm staring out of the window at Skyn, its colossal structure bearing down on us both. I thought women weren't allowed here? He's all about breaking the rules at the minute. I twist to face him, expecting an answer. This is the last place I want to be. People will see us together.

"I have some things to attend to." Callan's voice carries just enough for me to hear him as he pushes free from the car. Unlike all the other cars lined up in an expensive, showy line, Callan has broken the carpark tradition and parked diagonally over two spaces. His obnoxious, blacked-out car seems to mock all the others.

"I thought we were keeping things low key?" The last thing I need is to be associated with him. Neither of us has left the penthouse unless it's to work. I have no idea of Callan's usual work schedule, but at the moment, he is out of the door for eight and home twelve hours later.

“We are.” He flicks a blank look my way as we make our way up the stone steps.

“But we’re here.” He’s being obtuse, and it's annoying.

“Every employee and client has to sign an NDA. They can't discuss this place or its members, guests, or any other person who crosses its threshold.” We're at said threshold, and Stalin opens the door, greeting us both. “No one will say you were here,” he leans in to whisper as a broad business-type walks towards us, his head double-taking when he sees me being escorted in by the owner. He inclines his head to Callan and drops his gaze, refusing to acknowledge me.

I stare back over my shoulder, unable to put the level of trust in his clients or employees.

“How do you know you can trust everyone?” I say with unease.

“I don’t.” We step inside, and Stalin shuts us in. “But each employee is far better off on my good side than bad, and they know that. Each client is handpicked and invited. This club is invite only. We extensively research our members before we reach out to them.” When he said it was an exclusive club, I had no idea just how much.

“And the clients, are they better on your good or bad side?” How can he trust that man isn’t going to say I was here? “They know where they stand.” Riddles again.

“And me?”

“I prefer you beneath me.”

“Nice.” I tut. He grins over his shoulder and drops back to take my hand. My eyes widen, but I look away. He's never held my hand in public before. I don’t want to overthink this, but Callan is pretty closed off, and we share very little physical affection, so feeling his big warm hand enveloping mine feels both alien and nice. I’m conscious not to relax my hand and run my fingers over his skin. Stalin leads the way, and we head towards the back to Callan’s office. I remember the layout from my very short visit here before.

“She still in there?” Callan demands. I have no idea what he is talking about, and Stalin gives a very sharp but short nod. Callan stops and looks at me. “Do me a favour and play along?” I search his eyes. Play along with what? His head tilts, and I nod, unsure what I'm agreeing to. Just what or who am I going to find on the other side of this door? I'm not left guessing for long, as Stalin stands back, letting us pass. Callan pushes his way in, my hand in his.

“Katryna.” He sounds bored, his usually rich tone dry and lacking emotion, and as we step around the door, my eyes bug. I recover quickly, but a bubble of laughter is rushing up my throat. I clear it as I take in the near-naked woman spread out on his lounge. She slants narrow eyes at him, and they flare with recognition when she sees me, and now she looks pissed.

“I didn’t realise you were arriving with a guest.” Her accent is thick, Eastern European, and the way she says ‘guest’ tells me her English is a lot better than her accent suggests. She isn’t pleased about me being here.

“Zara isn’t my guest. She’s my girlfriend.” Years of manipulating my emotions stop me from choking out a shocked laugh. *Girlfriend*, the term feels unnatural and a whimsical part of me I have long buried rears her head. So this is why I’m here. I’m a pawn.

She erupts into a string of foreign words—swear words I believe are all directed at the unimpressed male staring at her, clearly bored. I catch his lips twitching and frown. He understands her?

“You don’t date!” she finally adds. This woman really isn’t happy. She sits up, her face a picture of shock and hurt.

“Didn’t,” he replies darkly. He pulls me to his side and leans in, pressing his lips to my hairline. It shocks both me and the other woman. Her lips open in an audibly painful gasp. My skin tingles from that one touch. “You’ll do well to remember that me, and my office, are off-limits. I’m your boss,” Callan warns.

“But—” she blabbers, her jaw hanging open. “I thought.” This is difficult to watch. Why has he brought me here and manipulated me to endure her pain? Her face flushes, her chest heaving, and she narrows her eyes, her pain quickly transforming into anger.

“You thought wrong,” Callan bites out.

She focuses her attention on me.

“He slept with me,” she declares loudly, her thin lips pulling up at the sides. But he has rules? I don’t understand. Who is she? Do I blame him? The woman is stunning. Her long bronzed hair hangs down to her waist, and her figure is well looked after. She is incredibly sexy, and I’m sure many clients pay for her time and now, her boss, so it seems. I try not to let my own discomfort show.

Callan barely shifts, but I feel his thumb rub along my pulse. My heart is hammering away. I feel sick. I shouldn’t, but I’ve been sleeping with him

too. We're not exclusive by any means, but I thought he would at least be loyal. How long have they been involved?

I can't bear the thought of being viewed as the other woman, someone to be pitied.

"I know," I find myself saying. "Callan mentioned his past before I moved in. And the cameras speak for themselves." I allude to having been a viewing participant to their night together. "I knew what I was getting into." I give her my best smile and watch as she grits her teeth. She stands quickly and storms out, leaving us alone and me glaring at the beast of a man standing in the centre of his office with a smirk on his face. Oh, this is absolutely not funny. "What in the actual fuck, Callan!"

"What?" He laughs, his eyes creasing and his hand hitting his upper stomach.

"I'm sure you could have dealt with *that* by yourself," I huff, not finding him funny in the slightest. What I really want to know is when he slept with the naked psycho?

"Where is the fun in that? Besides, I like you jealous." He gnaws his lip and tugs me to his hips.

I huff. I am not jealous. "A little more of a heads up wouldn't have gone amiss," I grumble. Has he been fucking her too?

"You're angry," he replies, his laughter dying off, his face becoming more serious. "It was before our arrangement." That one word 'arrangement' has the power to eliminate any delusions I was having on my way in here with the handholding, that and the naked woman. "A momentary lapse on my part."

"Evidently. If I'm honest, you don't strike me as the kind to mix business and pleasure."

"Truth be told, Miss Reid," he says, walking towards me reclined in his office chair, "I was confronted by a raven-haired beauty with a sharp tongue and for the first time, I made a mistake in my work life. I have you to thank for that," he bites out with a light laugh. I hold his stare, even when he leans and takes the chair arms so he is bent over me. Had he wished she was me, or was he hoping to expel me from his mind?

"Raven-haired, you say?" I'm trying not to smile.

"Black as the night." His eyes darken to molasses, and his hand raises and tucks a strand behind my ear.

"Sounds very dark." I muse.

“Needs to be to deal with me,” he smirks.

“So this mistake you made. Did you punish who caused it?” I whisper.

“Yes, I signed her life to me when she is already running from a different kind of monster,” he mutters, his finger running down my neck to linger on my scattered pulse.

“Seems a fair punishment. Katryna is the naked version of a hand grenade. Big mistake to make and with all those rules?” I mock.

He takes a seat on the desk, beside my legs, and stares at me.

“Absolutely, hence why I don’t mix business and pleasure. Women catch feelings.” He’s warning me not to catch any.

“Is there anything else you need to attend to or was that it?” I push free from his chair, allowing him to sit in it. He drops down and pulls me back so I’m in his lap.

“A few things, but first, this ‘try before you buy’ tactic, is it any good?” He squeezes my hip.

“Still under review.” I’m grinning ahead, but I don’t let him know I’m enjoying this.

“I’d have thought Greece would have been enough for you to make your mind up.”

“I think our arrangement speaks for itself. Excuse me. I need to nip to the ladies.” I stand quickly. I’m not sure how I feel about Callan fucking one of his employees to rid me from his mind.

“Stalin will escort you.” He stalls me, holding my wrist.

“Why, I don’t need help wiping,” I scoff.

“Very funny. Stalin goes.” His tone is quiet but severe.

“Great.” Rolling my eyes, I slip free and walk across the office to the door.

“Afterwards, we can dine out,” Callan tells me as I pull the door, finding Stalin standing opposite.

“When most people say dine out, they mean a restaurant with other people,” I retort from the door.

“Well, we’re dining in/out,” Callan quips.

“In/out?”

“We’ll be out but in our own private room.” He winks.

“Okay.” I haven’t got the energy to discuss it any further with him. Callan seems to have his fingers in everyone’s pies. If he says it’s private,

then I know it will be. Besides, I know I'll have a nice evening. Callan has a knack for being able to pull the real me to the surface.

Stalin escorts me to the toilet. I assume I will be using the club toilets, but he ushers me up the large grand staircase to an apartment above. It has Callan stamped all over it. He must sleep here occasionally. I don't much like that idea, and after being bombarded with Katryna, all I can think is that it was up here that he tried to rid himself of me with another woman. Stalin shows me the en-suite. I slip in and click the door shut, grateful to be alone for a few minutes. I'm way over my head and haunted by too many thoughts to process. By the time I've freshened up and returned to his office, Callan is shutting his computer down. His phone rings. He answers it wordlessly, listens and chuckles.

"No, it's fine. Zara can handle herself." His comment makes me frown. He shakes his head at me. Disconnecting, he walks to me and holds his hand out for me. "Need you to put a little show on. News of our *relationship* has reached downstairs," he informs.

"So?" What's downstairs got to do with anything unless he has fucked them all too? I raise my brow, gritting my teeth. "I'm not a performing monkey," I grate.

"I don't think they believe Katryna, and to save future hassle, I'd appreciate it if you'd humour them." I slap my hand in his and sigh. This is absolutely ridiculous—as if his employees have come up to get proof. With a wink, Callan opens the door as Stalin rolls his eyes. I can hear the quiet chatter of women, and I drop my head to Callan's shoulder, groaning. He laughs roughly, and the chatter stops. "Come on." He tugs my hand, taking the lead. Biting my lip, I suck in a breath and plaster a neutral look on my face, but Callan has other ideas. He wants to engage me in conversation, to add fire to this charade. "We'll head home and shower. I've booked the table for seven," he says. Discreetly, I chance a look around and find a few women hanging about at the end of the corridor.

"Sure." I smile, not sure what to say, but feeling exposed and like a big fat fraud. Callan stops and twists, dropping his lips to my face, his body blocking us from view, and he kisses my cheek. I clutch his jacket and stare up into his night-black eyes. He's playing them. Making out we are kissing. I stare hopelessly at him as he taunts me with his lips twice in one day. Can he see my desperation? My lashes flutter when he sighs lightly. He takes

my hand and continues us on our way towards the women, who are staring at me with both recognition and shock.

“Hello,” I breathe politely. Katryna is there, and she scoffs, but one woman, a young brunette, smiles brightly at me.

“Hi!” Her excited face flinches to respect when she looks at Callan. “Mr Scott,” she says.

“Girls, aren’t you supposed to be somewhere else?” His voice is detached, deep and lacking remorse. Callan sidesteps them, taking me with him.

I feel for the young girl, so I turn, walking backwards.

“I love your shoes. Louboutins, right?” I ask.

Her face splits into a wide smile.

“Yes, last season,” she gushes.

“You look incredible,” I tell her. Her cheeks flame, but her eyes shine happily at me.

Callan hooks an arm around my waist and presses his lips into my hair.

“Come on,” he delivers, suppressing a grin when my eyes bug at him. He is enjoying this far too much. Another group of women are loitering, and Callan tsks at them. “You’re here to work. My personal life is none of your business,” he barks, and they jump and scatter off. Then why the show? Is he enjoying pretending to be a couple?

I slap his chest.

“You big meanie.”

We reach the door, and Stalin holds it open for us as we leave and walk to Callan’s car.

“Are you telling me,” we both slide in the car, and Callans turns to me, “you’re not looking forward to me having my way with you in the shower, then a private meal in one of London’s top restaurants?”

I check my nails and try not to smirk.

“I never said that.”

“Good. Those women won’t say a word about you, and they will lie through their teeth to protect themselves—plausible deniability,” he imparts, sensing my anxiety at being here at Skyn. He squeezes my knee.

“Did we really have to flaunt that under their noses?” I feel sick at taunting them with our false relationship when Callan no doubt views them as an investment.

“If I’d left without you, Katryna would have caused more fuss.”

And with that, we are flying through London.

Chapter Sixteen

Three hours later, Callan and I are sky high and out of harm's way. He hasn't bothered to shave today, and the dark shadow to his jaw makes him look even more devilsome. He's left his suit jacket back at his and gone for a more casual look, kitted out in all black. Something about this look has me swooning like a teen meeting her crush for the first time.

"How does a man like you come to places like this and stay so untraceable?" I cut into my fish and wait for his reply before I put the fork in my mouth.

"Reputation." He winks. And a false name, I recall. The owner greeted us personally through the staff entrance, shaking a 'Mr Stalin's' hand. Initially, I was shocked, but I hid it with a polite smile as the owner looked at me and inclined his head.

"You mean Stalin's reputation," I murmur, finishing up the last of my meal and taking a sip of tonic.

Callan shrugs.

"Here, I'm Stalin. In some places, I'm Mr Scott. In others, I'm who I want to be."

"Will you ever tell me what it is you do?" In other words, will you ever trust me? I have a hoard of secrets myself that I have kept hidden beneath an ocean of fear—with his reputation and lifestyle, he is sure to have his own.

"Why, you're leaving soon. There is no need to share such information with you."

"What about my situation? We've barely spoken about it?" I ask. I want to know what steps he is taking—how this will all play out.

"I'm merely laying the foundations at the moment. When the time is right, you will know."

"When it's too late for me to do anything?" I respond. Callan eyes me briefly as he cuts into his steak and lifts it, chewing thoughtfully.

“You want out. I’ll get you out, end of. Everything else in between is for me to worry about. You just need to be ready to deal with your new life.”

“Which will be?” I laugh. He gives me half the information, never quite offering what I need.

“Miles from here and as someone else.”

“And what will happen to Zara Reid?” I say quietly.

“Who?” He grins.

Rolling my eyes, I huff out a sigh and lean back, watching him. I want to ask about his past, but Callan would never share that information with me. I have to constantly remind myself this is a means to an end and that each day I’m with Callan isn’t to cement myself in this life, but to exit it into a new one.

“Very funny. I’m going to see Oscar tomorrow. We’re going to hit a few bars,” I say, moving some salad about. I’ve been looking forward to seeing my friend.

“That’s not how this month works.” His bite has me raising my brow and glaring at him.

“It’s not going to work like this either.” My reply has Callan’s hand fisting.

“Mine for a month,” he reminds me.

“Callan, I can see my friend.”

“Not that one.” Callan tilts his head and smirks at me, saying, “Feel free to see any other friends.” He knows that Oscar is the only person I socialise with regularly.

“You’re an asshole.”

“Noted,” he chuckles, shoving another mouthful of steak into his mouth. Callan and I decline dessert, but we stay for a little while in the private dining room we were shown into. It surprises me how many restaurants have separate dining rooms. I’m used to being in the open with Oscar or my agent. Callan really does skirt the shadows. He is a dark angel watching the world happen all around him whilst never being noticed, handled with respect, and feared by those unfortunate enough to be associated with him. “You’re angry with me,” he states, looking at me across the table.

“I’m frustrated. You won’t tell me what’s going on with my situation. I can’t see my friend, and if I’m going to disappear, I’d like to see him before I fall off the face of the earth,” I snap pointedly at him. Surely he can

understand that? He and Stalin are close, and he certainly trusts him, so he should be able to put himself in my shoes and be more empathetic.

“It’s better for everyone this way. Oscar will blame me, so this way you can escape guilt-free,” he says with finality, standing.

“I take it dinner’s over then?” I growl sarcastically. I stand too and wish I could at least gain some control back. He is thwarting me at every turn, stalling, and manipulating things to suit him.

“You’re pissy as fuck. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Funny you’re the only person to bring that ugly trait out of me.” I give him a brittle smile and adjust the hem of my cocktail dress. It has a deep plunge V-neck and hits just past my knee. I’m ignoring him astutely and jump when his finger lands low between my breasts.

“You asked me to make you disappear, and this was our agreement. If you can’t cope with it, then I suggest we part ways, Zara.” His face is inches from mine, and his jaw is a stiff square as he stares at me threateningly. “The details are irrelevant,” he rasps, moving one side of my dress aside, revealing my breast. Moving his finger, he runs a soft circle around my nipple before lifting his brow for a reply.

“Yes, sir.” I take his finger and remove it, concealing myself and turning my back on him. My heels clack and drown out the sound of his footsteps. He is always so quiet. His arm scoops me up and holds me off the floor to his chest.

“Quit being a mardy bitch.” He nips my neck. “I’ve asked Edward to put the hot tub on for when we get back.” Edward, the ghost. I’ve never seen the man, not even once.

“Whatever pleases you,” I droll out meekly.

“Don’t be too compliant. I’ve recently found it a turn off,” he mutters, placing me back on my feet and requesting the bill.

~

Both Callan and I are quiet, tension brimming between us, and I’m battling with the compulsion to constantly fight him back or submit to him completely. To let go of the residue of fear and the small dose of sadness I am feeling over leaving this world behind, leaving Oscar behind. I know he wants to relax in the hot tub and despite wanting to piss him off, I can’t think of anything better than sitting under the stars and letting the water

massage all my aches away. As soon as we enter the apartment, I head straight for the en-suite and cleanse my face as Callan peers in the mirror.

“Do you want a drink?” His tone is softer now, light and not edged with tension or annoyance.

“Tonic or water is fine,” I reply just as politely through the glass. With a simple nod, he is gone again. I make sure my face is clean and clear before selecting a bikini from the drawer Callan has set aside for me. It’s a deep olive green with gold accents, and I love it. It really makes my eyes pop. I walk down to the main living area, swallowing a smile when Callan double-takes. It’s a lot cooler outside than I remember, so I get in quickly, dragging my hair into a short ponytail, and relax back in the bubbling water. The balcony is bigger than my garden at my townhouse, and behind the vine-covered screen, I can see the twinkle of London’s nightlife dancing to life. Twisting, I rest on my hands and look out on the streets below. It’s beautiful, and for now, I’m glad to be nothing more than a speck on this planet. No one knows where I am. I haven’t had to deal with the paparazzi in days, and to keep Oscar afloat of any day-to-day business, I have sent him the odd picture to upload on Instagram. I lean over and grab my phone and snap an image for him. I send it and promise to meet him tomorrow for lunch if he is still free. Callan can fuck off. He sends a simple ‘x’ back, and I know we will cement our plans in the morning.

Callan joins me a few moments later and flicks a remote, putting some music on quietly. I reach to grab our drinks so he can get in. His big body takes up most of the space, and after trying to manoeuvre my feet out the way, I give up and twist into his lap, holding his drink up for him to take.

“Cheers, angel.” My heart thumps, and I laugh, covering my surprise.

“Angel? That’s a new one.” I swallow the hope dancing in my throat.

“It beats ‘bitch’, which I believe I called you earlier.” His chuckle floats into the night, and I drop my head back on a sigh, resting on his broad shoulder.

“I’m not coping with this well. I feel guilty. I hate being out of the loop, and you want what you want, no questions asked,” I start quietly, as a wide palm flattens against my stomach.

“I can imagine this is hard, but it’s nothing compared to what could happen to you. Other than Oscar, you’re a lone wolf like me. I bet half the shit you get up to with Oscar isn’t even stuff you enjoy. You’re so used to

keeping up this façade.” I bite my lip because he has unravelled my life and laid me bare within a few seconds.

I can’t deny it, so I don’t.

“Still, he has been there for me.”

“I can guarantee Oscar would give you up to save his own skin,” he comments harshly. I throw him a spitting glare. “He would,” he tells me shortly. “I’ve known that boy for a long time, and he wouldn’t support you like you did him that night. That’s when I knew you were different—you stood up to us all.” He laughs lightly. “Threw your fucking shoes at me as you stood by him and nursed him better.” He sighs.

“He’s my friend,” I affirm. Of course I would care for him. What kind of person would I be if I didn’t?

“But would he do the same for you?”

“Ye—”

“He leaves you on nights out, uses you to gain popularity, entry to places and receive freebies. He’s weak, a coward,” Callan spits out, not at me, but I realise just how much he dislikes Oscar.

“He worked for you,” I say, confused.

“He ran favours for me to gain access to my club. The little prick owes me money.” He does? Why?

“I didn’t know,” I admit. I lift my drink up, and Callan takes it, placing it on the side. “Why does he owe you money?” Silence hangs between us, but I want to know. He’s debating whether to tell me or not, and I shift and turn, so I’m straddling his lap. “Tell me, please?” I run a thumb over his rough jaw and stare directly into his eyes. I can see the stars and moon reflected in their dark depths, and I feel like I’ve fallen into another dimension.

“You have no idea who he is, do you?” he whispers, shaking his head sympathetically at me.

I feel ridiculed and stupid. What does he know that I don’t? Oscar shares everything with me. Or did, until this man. And he never confessed to being involved with Callan until I walked into Skyn. I want to say as much, but I hold my tongue.

“What do you mean?”

“The coke?” he says, frowning at me.

“Absolutely not!” I defend my friend with all my might because he isn’t here to do so. Callan simply raises his brow, looking overly pitying. I chew my lip, but I can’t say I have ever seen Oscar high. When we go out, he gets

pretty drunk, and I'm boringly sober, but I'd know if he were high. I'd know. I shake my head at him. "He likes a drink when we're out, but he's never taken drugs, not with me around," I say. Hands run up my back and bend over my shoulders so his fingertips trace above my collarbone.

"The guy is a right coke whore. He's always face down in snow at Skyn."

What? This is news to me: disgusting and unwanted news. How long has this been going on? How have I never known? I feel a burden of grief rise in me and eclipse into revulsion at myself. How could I miss something like this? Is it because of Anita? Is he so bogged down with exhaustion that he is using anything he can get his hands on to give him some relief? More concerning, how is he getting it and from who?

I land Callan with an accusing stare. "So you supply him then?" I snap angrily. Is this where Callan gets his money from? Drugs?

"No, Skyn supplies him. Sex and drugs go hand in hand," he informs me coolly. "Even that night he left you alone in a car was to get a fix."

"Sex? I thought it was a strip club."

"It is, but I know the odd party favour occurs behind closed doors. The girls are prohibited from having sex on the main floor, but what they choose to do in their work hours with my clients privately is up to them. Some of them want the extra cash—others don't." He shrugs.

"That's prostitution," I whisper hotly.

"That's their business—plausible deniability." He grins.

I scoff and turn away. "I don't want to talk about this anymore," I mutter, floating to the other side and frowning at him.

"What, hearing that your BFF is a druggie or that the women who work in my club choose to sell sexual favours for their own gratification is too much for your pretty little head?" he murmurs darkly. "For a woman who has experienced the dark in this world, you're damn naïve," he delivers coldly.

"You know, sometimes I can't work out if you don't like me or if you're just a twat," I spit, pushing up and trying to climb out, but he hauls me back.

"I'm a twat, Zara. If I were anything other than a monstrous prick, you wouldn't have asked me to fight your demons for you," he breathes into my ear, nipping the lobe and keeping me secured to his grasp.

“Well, in Greece, you were half decent, so what happened?” I pout. He chuckles and tugs me back to him, and I clutch his shoulders for support.

“Greece didn't involve the Russians and the heap of shit you were carrying.” His finger traces my stomach. Even though he showed no surprise, I wonder if my past shocked him from his normal calm confines. All those times he had been around me, and he never thought I could be hiding such secrets. His thumbs rub down my ribs.

“What made you come to Greece?” It's played on my mind a lot. He could have waited for me to return to London. He flew all that way to have me, seemingly thinking I would even return with him like some damn prize. His over-inflated ego knows no bounds.

“I knew with you being away from London, your guard would be down. You were vulnerable there. I couldn't wait any longer, and I needed you to accept we were going to happen, even if you didn't want to acknowledge it,” he confesses with a heated stare. My fingers slip into the damp strand of his hair at the base of his neck. For all his hardness, this is the only soft part of him, and I love the feel of it on my fingertips.

“Smart play.” I relent and relax, lowering myself so I'm flush to his groin. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I went to your house. You weren't there, and I noticed Greece written on your calendar. So I had my IT guy hack your laptop.” I wasn't expecting him to be so honest. I don't like that he has accessed my personal life so easily, but I don't regret that he did.

“Why do you stare at women?” I whisper, now following the lines of his tattoos. I don't want him to bottle up. We're finally talking more freely, and I feel like I'm able to dig below the surface of Callan Scott.

He laughs. “I don't. I'm not a Pervy Pete. Why do you ask that?” He is laughing openly now, and the sound tugs at my own mouth.

“You stare at me.” My voice is quiet, but I hold that heavy gaze.

“So I do,” he muses, tucking my hair back and smiling at me—a real smile and not a devilsome grin that usually makes my heart skitter. Oh no, this smile knocks it out of the park. His face is disarmingly handsome, and my gut curls in on itself in physical agony.

I puff out a ball of air. His smile captures his whole face, captivating me.

“So you don't do that with other women?” My inexperience is showing, and the bastard laps it up, and grinning wildly, he chuckles and squeezes my hip.

“No, Zara, I do not stare at other women.” I’m being painfully jealous, possibly a little insecure. This is nothing but an arrangement, but it’s the longest I have spent sexually with a man. Perhaps my inexperience is what is muddling this all up in my head. I flick a look up at him and realise no matter what my circumstances were, if I ever met Callan in a different life, I’d still find myself hooked on him, caught up in a tidal wave being rolled around and thrashed about over and over. “I like that you’re jealous.”

“Please shut up,” I stutter, mortified. He sniggers when I drop my head forwards and hide my reddening cheeks.

“Gladly, do you want me to fuck you raw in here or inside?” he asks with intent. Lifting my head, I chew my lip in thought. Humouring me, he watches patiently with a smirk, even though I can feel his cock hardening between us. Reaching behind me, I untie my bikini top, hold it over the tub edge and drop it to the decking with a splat, giving him my answer.

Chapter Seventeen

I've had a busy few days, finalising details with Georgie and approving the music, so that thankfully, despite my indecisiveness, we will be able to make amendments to the video, meaning I only need to shoot a short segment before my fragrance goes live. Well, Georgie will make the amendments. I've just sent him grey, apparently. I'm really hoping this all comes together before Callan puts my disappearing act into gear—not for my sake, but Georgie's. He's put a lot of work into bringing my perfume to life, assisting me on the way, and ensuring I bring my best to the table. I promised Oscar we would catch up, and that's what we are doing today. Besides, I still need to name my fragrance, and my friend is the perfect person to help with that.

“Zara, what's going on?” Oscar says. He is blowing a steaming cup of coffee as we sit in a quiet café. I'm wearing one of my favourite bodycon dresses and an oversized floppy hat for good measure. I feel so exposed after being hidden away with Callan that I just want to feel the luxury of being anonymous. Plus, if Callan knew I was here, he'd lose the plot. I want to ask Oscar about what Callan revealed to me last night, but a small part of me doesn't want to believe it. Oscar has given me no indication that he is using drugs, and for all I know, Callan is manipulating me into thinking Oscar is this bad guy just to put a wedge between us. My friend looks in great health and certainly not like the coke-whore Callan described.

“Nothing,” I convey with as much sincerity as possible. If there is one thing I will miss, it will be this man. He has been my complete rock.

“You haven't been home for god knows how long,” he grumbles. “I miss you. I never expected to be upstaged by the likes of shady Mc shade.” His bottom lip pops out, so he is staring at me with a face full of hurt.

“Don't be like that. It's nothing serious, just a bit of fun, but we both work such random hours we barely can grab any time, so when we do...” I trail off, not wanting to further my lie.

“You want to fuck,” he huffs, and my cheeks blush deep red. I eye Oscar from below my hat to find he is smirking at me.

I pick up my tea and take a sip, trying to dispel the heat from my cheeks. I can't, so I make light of it.

“Now who's jealous,” I laugh, but Oscar is frowning at the table, his face a mix of emotions.

“Just be careful, remember what he did to me.” Guilt washes over me, and I shift in my chair. I'm a terrible friend, the absolute worst, and here he is, supporting me, showing concern for me, and I'm going to disappear from his life without a trace.

“I'm sorry. It really doesn't mean anything, and that's just what I need, a bit of no-strings fun. There is no expectation with him. We both want to keep work separate. There is no worry of anyone finding out because we're the least likely pair to put together,” I say quietly. I have no doubt people have recognised me, and it won't be long before the press arrives.

“So you're dating him?” His face is a picture of shock.

“No!” I exclaim, then drop my voice when a few people turn our way. “I just meant no one is likely to connect us to one another, and that's perfect for us. Me,” I say, trying to make him understand. I shift in my chair and readjust my hat when someone leans to get a look at me.

“He can't be trusted,” Oscar huffs. “Can we at least plan a night in or something? I'd like to catch up with my friend.”

I've really put him out, and I feel shit about it.

“Of course. I'm sorry. We're catching up now,” I say. “Maybe I can come to you,” I suggest, knowing Callan will argue with me being at mine or me bringing Oscar to his.

“Yeah, sure, fancy a quick visit to that boutique around the corner?” He sounds dejected and looks worse. Guilt is clawing its way all over me, a constant niggle in my brain.

“Oscar, I really am sorry,” I say genuinely. I lean over the table and hug him tightly until he reciprocates fully, and we stay like that for a while.

“It's fine, just as long as you're not going to disappear on me.” I stiffen, but keep my arms around him. My guilt may as well be sitting on my shoulder, its head thrown back as it laughs at my predicament.

“Of course not. Why would you say that?” I whisper, clenching my eyes tight as the lie forms and leaves my mouth.

“Because you seem different, and you’ve mentioned wanting out of modelling before. Callan knows people,” he answers honestly. We sit back, and Oscar stares at me, really stares at me.

“I don't trust him with that,” I lie. I never expected my friend to be this insecure. “I’m not going anywhere,” I say. Not yet, anyway. “Please don't be angry with me. I didn't realise how much I needed this break until I had it.”

He nods and sits back.

“Let’s go find you some new underwear.” He winks, and I grin. We leave cash on the table, and Oscar links arms with me. “I just have one question,” he says sheepishly.

“Sure.” I smile at him, happier now that he seems less disgruntled.

“How did you make him break his rule?” Oscar whispers. It’s unlikely Callan or anyone else is going to turn up and overhear our conversation, but I check over my shoulder anyway.

“You know about his rule?” I frown, keeping my head down to try to hide from any possible cameras stalking us.

“Well, he is so strict with the girls, and I heard one of them telling the other girls they had seen him out once and overhead him giving a woman his rules before he took her out of the bar.” I nod. I wonder if he knows about the no kissing, too.

I shrug.

“He followed me to Greece,” I tell him. This shocks my friend, and he begins firing questions at me left, right, and centre.

“So what happened?” Oscar is eyeing me with excitement and apprehension.

“He asked for one night. I have nothing to lose, so I figured why not,” I explain. “I left and got on the plane the next morning and thought nothing of it. It's what we agreed, but he turned up at my casting, and we’ve been grabbing what time we can ever since.”

“And kissing?” he asks gently. My cheeks heat and I shake my head. I don’t know why, but admitting that to Oscar makes me feel dirty about this situation like I’m nothing more than sex for Callan.

“So the sex is mega?” His eyes are wide with excitement.

“Oscar!” I moan with embarrassment. I feel odd having this conversation with him. He is forever detailing his conquests, but I’ve never had to do that, and it feels weird to start now.

“Oh, Zara, come on! I always share with you?” he pleads.

“Overshare more like,” I laugh, nudging his shoulder. He pouts at me with puppy dog eyes. “Yes, the sex is incredible.” I smirk.

“Glad you think so.” Callan’s deep voice makes us jump apart as his car comes to a stop beside us. I swing a look around, looking for any paps, but we’re safe. “I have a few spare hours. Get in.”

“I’m spending the afternoon with Oscar,” I say when I feel my friend stiffen at my side. “I’ll see you later,” I suggest. Callan’s jaw clenches, and he eyes Oscar with enough anger to fire a bullet. Disdain drips from the car, and I shiver.

“It’s fine, Z.” Oscar puts distance between us, and I look between my friend and the devil I made a deal with. “I’ll see you Friday night. I’ll make us dinner?” he says. “We can discuss your fragrance and filming,” he says hopefully. I give him a soft smile and nod.

“She’s busy Friday,” Callan interjects. I open my mouth to object, but Callan raises his brow. “She’s busy for a month,” he tells my friend. “Isn’t that so, Zara?” When I look at Oscar, realisation dawns. He knows this is being controlled by Callan, and given the man’s reputation, I hope he thinks this is some selfish demand I’ve been threatened into. I don’t want him knowing the whys and whats of the situation. I peck his cheek.

“Love you,” I say and meet his eyes, silently telling him it’s okay. He nods and gives me a quick hug. Selfishly, I would rather Oscar believe worse of Callan than know the truth about me. I watch him walk away before the door clicks open, and I’m climbing in, then we are rumbling up the road.

“That was rude.” I turn to Callan, removing my hat, and laying it on the dashboard.

“I don’t trust him,” is his vehement reply.

“He paid for his mistake,” I snap.

“If you want a domestic, feel free to get out and go find some poor bastard to moan at,” he mutters. God, he is so infuriating. Grinding my teeth, I inhale slowly, trying to let his callous words wash over me.

“How’s your day been, dear?” I say, injecting concern into my voice.

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you.”

“Wow, you are in a bad mood. Who shoved a stick up your ass?” I comment dryly. “So, what does suit me then?” I drawl.

“I suit you,” he says darkly, his eyes sweeping my face and dropping to my crossed legs. “Take your underwear off,” he commands, turning his face back on the road.

“What makes you think I’m wearing any?” I laugh. His eyes flash to mine. Does he seriously think this dress accommodates underwear?

“You’re not funny.” He scowls. His knuckles are an unhealthy white on the wheel.

“I’m not lying either,” I spit. His eyes narrow, as do mine, but I break eye contact first and stare out the window. Another fifteen minutes, and we are pulling up outside a sky-high building, where we’re greeted warmly. Callan places a hand on my back, guiding me to an elevator, then we are swooping upwards at a ridiculous speed. When we hit the top, the door opens, and we’re in a small entryway. Slanted gold scrawl welcomes us, the word ‘Nexo’ split over two doors. So this is Nexo. The Internet does not do it justice. As we walk towards the matte black doors, they open, and Callan walks us in. The place is empty, and I suspect that’s because it is lunchtime—maybe it’s an evening venue.

“This way.” Callan beckons me away from the bar with his head, and we’re going through a keypad-secure door with ‘STAFF’ written in the same font. We pass a few rooms and head to the door at the end. Another keypad keeps this one secure, and past this, we climb a set of stairs that look out over the bar. I hadn’t noticed the windows before, but I guess they are blacked out like his car.

I’m looking out down into the luxurious bar when I hear the distinct sound of his zip. I turn to find him shrugging his shirt off, then his heavily decorated body is on show. No matter how flawless he is, how clean-cut, my eyes drop to the ridiculously big appendage bursting free from his boxers. He rids himself of those and is walking with purpose to me, his cock bobbing heavily. I need little encouragement, and I strip out of my dress just in time. His eyes burn with anger when he finds I was, in fact, telling the truth about my lack of underwear.

“You’ll wear underwear in future,” he growls.

“You’ll mind your own business.” My chin lifts, and I search his gaze for the usual flare of anger, but instead, he grins wolfishly. It’s disarming. I blink in confusion.

His hands cup my hips, and he lifts me as if I weigh no more than a doll. He secures my legs on either side of his wider frame and positions himself

before ramming upward, causing my head to knock back.

“Fuck, Zara.” His head is pressed into my neck. His tongue glides out, and he nips and sucks at my collarbone and jaw. Shit, I wasn’t ready, and pain twists in my stomach, but I know it will soon be replaced by pleasure. So much pleasure.

“You are my business, woman,” he grunts. He swivels and pumps, and his hips keep on at it, drawing soft mewls and quiet gasps from me as he plants me flat against the window. He lifts my arms up above my head, and his mouth is nipping up along the delicate flesh of my chin. I quiver, and my pussy flutters and clamps down on him. He grunts and ruts forward again, over and over.

“Callan.” My moan is shy of mute.

“Hmm.” He thrusts deeper, holding himself high before retreating, swivelling and driving back in. It's a hypnotic, delicious rhythm.

“Kiss me,” I plead. The pitying look on Oscar’s face still feels like barbed wire wrapped about my throat. Callan drops my hands in an instant, and I think I’ve lost him, but he cups my jaw, and my breath spatters out in relief. His eyes are heavy and locked on my lips, his hips relentless—a constant steady assault. Each drive draws a rough grunt from him and a long, soft whimper from me. His face moves in, but it tilts away from my mouth, and he drops an open kiss on my cheek.

I try to move to meet his lips, but he is dropping another on my cheekbone, one to my temple, and another to my eyelid, all the while pumping into me. He follows the same path down the other side. Just a millimetre from my lips, he drops another kiss, and the near contact has my climax rushing forward in a blistering kaleidoscope of colour. It’s such a shock that I buck and cry out.

“That’s it, give yourself to me,” he growls, “you look phenomenal when you come apart.” His jaw hangs open as he watches me with rapture.

“Callan.” I grip onto him, my fingers shaking against his big shoulders. He pants, keeping himself in check. I don’t want him in check. I want to unleash hell on this man for humiliating me in front of my friend—for dictating my time.

“I know.” He grins, holding himself still as I pulse and throb around him. He shakes his head, trying not to topple over in his own oblivion. He peels us off the window and walks us to the low, wide sofa and lays us down before continuing his assault. He takes me roughly on the couch. I claw at

his shoulders, my hips flexing up to meet each heavy drive. “Zara, don't you fucking hold back on me. You're angry at me, so show it.” He slams deep, and I meet it with my own sharp tilt. My eyes widen, and I shudder as another bang from him assaults my womb.

I cry out and dig my nails deep. I try to pull his mouth to mine.

“Please!” I cry, shame filling me. I've sunk to begging, and he looks triumphant. “Please.” I hold tight, trying to ensure a connection between our lips, and he yanks his head free and spins us, so I'm now straddling him. I slam down out of frustration, and he roars out.

His eyes flash with deep appreciation.

“Again,” he pants. I do, my little hips twisting delicately before I lift and drop carelessly. His mouth hangs open—his face pulled into an awed frown. I do it again and again, and each drop sends a huge bang to explode in my groin. He fills me so deeply like this, and I'm soon shaking above him. His thumb finds a place at the apex of my thighs, and we're both shouting out our release. I drop forward and lick and nip his big chest. We're slick with sweat, our hearts galloping together.

“I know I said I'd make you disappear, but I might just have to make it so I can still get to you,” he breathes roughly, honestly. I stiffen and hide my face. “Thirty days isn't enough to fuck you out of my system.”

“One month,” I tell him. “I can't give you more, Callan. Don't ask me to give you more,” I whisper. I want to believe this is just sex. The man infuriates me beyond belief. He is rude and ruthless, but with him, I can truly be who I am and not keep myself in check. He offers me a freedom I've never had without having to run from the life I live. It's a very tempting offer. Or it would be if he didn't just want me for sex. I'm not stupid enough to believe otherwise.

He says nothing and moves us, so we are both lying on the sofa. He drags a blanket over us, and I keep my cheek on his chest and wait for my breathing to level out. We stay like that until our chests slow and our hearts hum to a steady beat. Finally, he breaks the silence.

“How was your morning?” He wants to know.

“Average, so far, my afternoon has been surprisingly enjoyable.” I yawn into his chest, which vibrates with laughter. He shifts, dragging my leg over his thigh.

“Would you believe me if I told you I've gone from picking a woman up once a month to being unable to go a morning without moving meetings

just to get you to myself?" He says it with such conviction that I can't deny his claim, but I don't want to believe it. I'll start to feel things, and that's not good for either of us.

"The former, yes, the latter not so much." I grin against his flank, and the dark blush of nipple is too much of an allure, so I bite it gently. He groans and runs a hand over my hair. I keep on moving up until I'm face to face with him.

Allure, that's what I will call my fragrance. It's dark and bold, decadent and sexy, alluring. I smile inwardly, happy that he has assisted me unknowingly in something he probably has no interest in. I want to thank him, celebrate my little business venture with him, but he will never allow it. A sudden thought occurs, and I smile mischievously at him and tug the blanket so it is covering his nose and mouth.

"Do you trust me?" I say. His eyes tighten, and he eyes me sceptically before he nods. I smile softly. "Can I try something?" I ask.

My gut instinct tells me he already knows what I'm asking, what I'm about to do. Slowly, he nods, and I cup his face, the blanket flattening over his lips. Callan's hands come up to hold mine, and I lift my brow.

Hesitantly, he moves his hands, holding them up in defeat, and I can feel the heavy drum of his heart picking up. I keep our gazes locked and slowly lower my face to his. I press my mouth to his, the blanket a soft barrier between us. His cock knocks against my stomach, and a harsh sigh exits his nose. I don't push my luck and pull back, smiling to myself. I twist so my back is to him, snuggling into his side. I stay quiet, his hand tightens around my waist, and I try not to grin at my small victory. I'm dazed with happiness, staring back at our reflection in the blacked-out window. Callan's eyes are on mine, staring, assessing, satisfied, and unblinking in his continued hunger for me. We lay like that for an age, watching each other in the silence, wordlessly existing in a post-sex haze.

Chapter Eighteen

After a little while, I shift and get up to avoid the tumble and crash of thoughts about this intoxicating man. Callan moves to his chair and relaxes, watching me dress. I roll the dress over my bare bottom, looking back at him, scowling at me.

“Next time, you’ll wear underwear,” he says, his tone thick with anger that leaves little room for argument. I twist my neck, no longer meeting his eye. He can make all the suggestions in the world, but I don’t have to abide by them. Besides, my dress hits past my knee—no one could look up there even if they wanted to. The material is a thick band around my legs, holding them together.

“I’m ready to leave.”

“I have some work I need to do.” Callan is already focused on the screen in front of him. I don’t want to keep him, and I want to let Oscar know that I’m okay. He looked sick to the stomach when I left.

“Okay, see you later.” Grabbing my bag, I pull out my mirror and check my makeup, reapplying another layer of lipstick. The click of my compact echoes around the room as I slide my feet into my heels. I shake my hair and head for the door.

“Zara, you’ll stay here.”

Callan’s tone makes my spine stiffen, and my feet move quicker. I grab the handle and swing back to look at him already up on his feet, shoulders tense.

“We may have made a deal, but you don’t own me, Callan Scott. If I want to walk out and carry on about my day, I will.” I give him the most insincere smile I can muster and pull the door open. He is on me in a quick attack. His hand slams the door shut, and he yanks my wrist up.

“You’re really fucking aggravating. Anyway, customers have arrived. We can’t leave,” he growls, nodding his head over to the window, where I notice the first few people entering the bar below. How long did we lie just

staring into each other's eyes? I hate how he can capture me with that look. Ownership. I can't explain it any other way.

"Surely that's more reason for me to leave without you," I snap.

"What's the rush? You have nothing planned, nowhere to be."

"That doesn't mean I have to be joined to your hip," I state with a light laugh.

He glowers at me. "We're leaving together," he tells me, grabbing my neck in a vice grip and pulling me to his face. I don't baulk. In fact, I press on to my toes to match his height. His stare is nothing like the reflected one from earlier. Oh no, it's spitting fire.

"We'll be seen. What are you planning?" I search his eyes. He grins darkly, and for a moment, I worry he is ready to out me to those bastards that took my father's life. "What the fuck is going on?" I shout, shaking in his hold.

"We need to be seen together. I don't care if you shake it off as you planning a party here at the bar, but we need to be photographed. I need to draw them out. Understand," he orders.

"Who, *them*?" Santino and Ramis. My eyes widen, and I back up, hitting the door. I gape, shake, and mutter a protest. "We've not even discussed any of this!"

He's kept me in the dark.

What the hell has he been planning all week?

"And here I was hoping an orgasm would calm you the fuck down." He glowers above me, rubbing at his temples.

"Oh my God. You slept with me so I wouldn't cause a fuss about this." I laugh in disbelief. He is a complete nut.

"No, I fucked you because I wanted to. It's a bonus that it usually relaxes you," he mutters. "Do you need another orgasm?" he queries, fiddling with the material of my dress.

"No, Callan, I do not need another orgasm. I need you to tell me what is going on?"

"Jesus, woman. I just did!" he shouts, making me jump. I look at the bar below, expecting heads to be turned our way, as his deep voice must have carried, but below, people go about their business unaware of the war raging above them.

Satisfied we weren't heard, I roll my head slowly and smirk at him.

"Now who isn't calm?"

“That's only because you're irritating the fucking life out of me!” he roars. Wow! Any second now, the glass is going to shatter under the force of his timbre. I hold my hands up, sidestepping him to move back into the office. He is panting behind me, so I take myself to the sofa and sit down, doing my best to ignore him. I think it's him who needs another orgasm.

“You're going to burst a vein if you carry on,” I say after a few minutes, when he is still knocking things about and slamming drawers shut on his desk.

“Well, the only vein I want to burst doesn't want to be anywhere near your mouth because I have a good feeling you bite,” he snipes, yanking the drawer open again and yelling when it won't close. Rolling my eyes, I shift and face away from him, trying not to laugh. He is comical when he is all riled up, and despite his temper, he hasn't even tried to take it out on me physically. It's the complete clarity I need to know he would never physically hurt me. I anger him regularly, but I'm sure if a man spoke to him the way I do, he would knock them clean out.

“Yes, well, perhaps if you communicate with me better, your dick would get what it wants,” I mutter. The papers stop shuffling, and the keyboard remains quiet. I sneak a look over my shoulder to where Callan is watching me over his desk, practically vibrating with anger.

“Don't mess with me, Zara. I will tan your arse so red, your lipstick will be fucking lighter,” he growls, pointing at my mouth. I pout for good measure, enjoying seeing his jaw clench.

“Fine, suck your own cock.” I give him the finger and slouch back in the seat, pulling my phone out and ignoring him for the next hour. The only time he gains my attention is when he begins to talk fluently in Chinese. I try not to show my surprise, but Callan's eyes flick to me, catching me gaping at him. After a few more words, he cuts the call and stands.

“Let's go.”

“You speak Chinese?”

“Mandarin,” he corrects me. Rolling my eyes, I lift my chin to make some smart retort, but he shuts me up by saying further, “and German, Russian, and Spanish.” So he did understand Katryna back in his office. He collects up his things without paying me any mind. I'm seriously impressed. Five languages.

“Why?”

“It gives me insight into certain business ventures. Not many people know, and it gives me an advantage.” He looks at me then, silently conveying to keep my mouth shut. I nod and stand, waiting for him to let us out.

“So we will be photographed?” I ask on my way down the corridor.

“You know, Zara, we could have had this conversation back in my office.”

“Well, we didn’t,” I snipe. He is right, but both of us are too hot-headed and stubborn.

“I’ve arranged for a photo to be taken. It will be backed up by those downstairs. Now, when asked, you can say it was for an event. Oscar’s birthday is coming up, maybe suggest it’s for him.” Oh, god, it is. I feel bad, as it completely slipped my mind.

“Right, okay.” I can’t believe I forgot Oscar’s birthday. I need to sort him a gift out. “So we get photographed, and then what?” I keep walking, and as I do, I recall searching for Callan online and coming up very short on information and of any photos. Not a single one.

“Wait.” I turn and stop, putting my hand on his chest. “You don’t have photos. You’re practically a google ghost,” I tell him.

He smirks and leans into the wall.

“Was someone searching online for me?”

“You beat up my friend,” I remark. “I had no idea what Oscar was involved in with you, and I wanted to find out,” I defend.

“You wanted me.” He grins.

“Callan, please just work with me here. You don’t have photos. Why?”

“Seeing my face doesn’t bring in more clients.”

“Erm, have you seen your face?” I laugh. Women would flock to Nexo, Hex, and Skyn. My god, they would flock to Skyn if they knew this man owned them all.

“Daily,” he smiles, and I roll my eyes skyward, “the anonymity of me is what draws people in. Plus, certain business aspects require anonymity,” he tells me. Of course they do if you’re a criminal.

I frown at him.

“So why give yourself up?” I’m curious and really trying hard to catch up with him.

“You want to hide yours. Maybe it’s about time I showed mine.”

“You’re taking a huge risk.” I’m putting him in the firing line. I search his face with concerned eyes. “Callan, I can’t let you do that,” I murmur quietly.

“Zara, people like Santino and Ramis know who I am. I’m sure they have a dossier on me as I have them. In my world, it’s pragmatic to do so. All I will be doing is showing the London elite my face.” He is as lost to the shadows as I am. I think of all the women who will be desperate to meet Callan Scott, the mysterious club owner. My stomach sours.

“So, we have a photo, and it draws them out,” I say softly, sickened.

“Yes, seeing you with me will be like dangling a worm. They will either fear you have asked for my help, which you have, or worry I am going to bag you up myself.” His smile is dark, too dark. I shudder inwardly and repel any acceptance he is capable of such crimes.

The thought of Callan wrapping someone in a tarp and disposing of them sends a shiver through me. I refuse to believe he is a killer—for my own sanity.

“As if. That gun is just for show.” I aim to make light of the situation, but my laugh is brittle. Callan deadpans me, and I snap my mouth shut. I nod shakily and turn, walking away before stopping. “You’re not going to bag me up though?” I say. After witnessing my father get shot, death has always terrified me.

“Not properly, no, but if you want to disappear, you need to be dead to this world, Zara. You know that, don't you?” He moves, standing to full height. “You do know you can never speak to Oscar again, never return to the UK, and never show your face again—at least not that face?” He points to me, and I frown.

“Do you know what you’re asking?” he asks again, more forcefully. “Zara Reid has to die.”

I nod stiffly. “I know.”

“Good, let’s draw out the vermin,” he says, guiding me back down to the bar where Stalin greets us both with a nod. The bar has come to life with people sitting, drinking and laughing. I envy their freedom.

“Hey, Zara!” My name being called across the bar has me flinching. I twist, finding Cassandra Faraday smiling at me, her hand waving lightly. She’s not alone, and the tension in my body spikes up another notch. I snap into work mode and give her my most fashioned smile. I’m glad I touched up my makeup.

I step toward her, but Callan takes my wrist.

“We’re leaving,” he reminds me coolly.

Tugging free, I swing a look back at him and give him a taunting smile. I’m sick of his controlling temperament. Flashing me a warning look, he moves and grips my neck through my hair. I stare at him, conveying how testing he is becoming and that it's not appreciated on my part at all. He smirks softly, enjoying my defiance, and I shake with unbridled anger.

“The cameras will love this,” I spit, and his eyes widen. He lost control. He bares his teeth, growling. I break free, shaken up, and move around the bar to Cassandra and her friend. Both look dolled up and ready to party. Where Cassandra is beautifully blonde and tan, her friend is the opposite, creamy skin, and dark brunette hair.

“Cassandra, how are you?” I say brightly, conveying complete happiness and not soul-deep anger and confusion at Callan’s antics. These women have no idea that in a few minutes, I’m going to risk sealing my fate with a simple image.

“Great, thanks. How are you? Your last campaign did well.” Her question catches me off guard, but it’s highly welcome. I cling to it, desperate to not lose myself to the hysteria rising in me.

“Yes, better than I hoped.” She smiles, and I reciprocate before I cast a look back to find Callan now sitting at the bar looking the picture of calm and violence. How he manages such contradicting emotions without even trying is exasperating. I can never keep up with him. He is always three steps ahead. He turns to Stalin, saying something discreetly before he turns those damn dark eyes to me.

I won’t give in and let him win. He’ll no doubt tan my arse like he warned back in his office, but some tiny part of me welcomes it. I refrain from shivering under his unwavering gaze and instead, twist back to Cassandra, my smile fixed in place.

“This is my friend, Lily, Lily, this is Zara Reid.”

Shit, I know that name. I search my mind frantically. She has mentioned her friend before at a fundraiser. Damn it. By way of luck, I suddenly remember.

“Oh, your photography friend!” I beam and see her eyes flash with surprise.

“Yes, that's me.” She laughs, seeming a little embarrassed by my attention. Cassandra smiles proudly at her, and it reminds me of mine and

Oscar's relationship, only I'm betraying him in gigantic proportions and apparently, he is lying to me about an addiction.

"She's amazing. She recently photographed for Bennett and Klein," Cassandra states, looking from me to her friend.

"Oh, wow, they built this building," I say, recalling the information I found whilst waiting for Callan to finish up business. Half an hour ago, I was unaware of who built this building, how many businesses are located here, or who owned the building. Now, I'm a pro. It's so far from anything that interests me, but something about Callan makes me want to dig deeper, too. Lily frowns lightly but quickly covers herself. I don't blame her. I'm not quite sure why I even shared the information, and now I have, I can't seem to stop. "Callan owns Nexo," I explain, looking back at the angry bear behind me. It's almost comical that he is so angry with me.

"Oh really, small world. We tend to stick to the business district, glad we didn't. This place is amazing," Lily says.

"Yes, it has its charm," I murmur, finding I can no longer fight the compulsion to look back at him. He's getting impatient. A few other people have noticed me, and it takes only one to post a picture or share my location. He motions for me to come back to him. "Excuse me, ladies, it was nice to meet you, Lily," I murmur as we say our goodbyes. I step away as he requests that the bartender deliver a complimentary bottle of champagne to both ladies.

Standing, he presses his hand into my back and ushers me towards the exit, Stalin a few feet behind. Everyone is gawping at me. Me, Zara damn Reid, being escorted out by two mountains looking ready to murder anyone who looks at them. As soon as I step into the elevator, Callan's lips fall to my ear, and his eyes meet mine in the mirrored wall.

"Oh, you're in so much trouble, Miss Reid."

~

We're silent in the car.

Stalin, although seemingly indifferent, must be aware of the growing tension in the back seat. After a slow and awkward drive, we finally arrive at the underground car park, and Callan waits as Stalin assists me out.

"Thanks. I like your tie," I say, apparently catching him off guard. He touches the material and smiles.

“It was a gift.” His eyes slip over the hood where Callan is glaring violently at me. Rolling my eyes, I pat Stalin’s chest.

“Wish me luck.” The mountain of a man coughs out a laugh, then rights himself and suddenly looks over my shoulder with unease. I turn, surprised to find Callan at my back. I jump but straighten up and walk past, only to be held back when he grips my wrist in his spade of a hand. His grip is tight, and I can instantly feel the blood flow weaken. My fingers tingle, so I wiggle them.

“Stalin will go ahead,” he says directly to me as I watch the other guy move around us and wander over to the elevators. It's a tense few minutes of us both breathing harshly and staring at one another until Callan cracks his neck and glares at me for a few heated seconds. He moves first, walking towards the lifts. “Move.”

“Don’t bark at me. I’m not a dog!” I snap and overtake him. My heels clack loudly, and I imagine each sound is me hitting him with my shoe. That reminds me, what did he do with my heels that night after he ordered Oscar to be beaten up? As soon as we step into the lift, I face him. “Where are my heels from the night I was at Skyn?”

“In my office at Skyn,” he replies simply. I don't remember seeing them the other day. He begins undoing his tie and unbuttoning his shirt. “Undress,” he demands. So he kept them then. That makes me happy.

“You can forget it. I’m not sleeping with you,” I spit, crossing my arms over my chest. We may have made a deal, but he certainly isn’t holding up his side. He can’t keep me in the dark about any progress with how he plans to extract me from this life. He says he is drawing them out, but why, and at what cost?

Callan laughs. “You never fail to prove me right, Zara. You’re so predictable with your little tantrums.” He is still stripping, and I want to scream at him for always being right. I send him to hell with my glare, but he scoffs and continues removing his clothes at a leisurely pace. Oh, he thinks he is just so damn fucking perfect. Well, fine, I will prove him wrong. I move towards him and slap my hand onto the emergency button, stalling us. I jerk forwards into his chest, and even he rocks at the sudden jolt.

I grab my dress at the hem, tugging it up, but it doesn’t shift properly. I growl and stamp my foot in frustration. Big hands grip at the neck, and with a loud tear, my dress hangs open like a damn jacket. I gasp and stare up at

Callan, who is panting wildly. His eyes zero in on my bare crotch, but before he can move, I drop to my knees and drag his trousers down, freeing him. He's huge, and when I touch the tip with my tongue, he staggers back into the wall, moaning.

I grab his cock and squeeze hard. Hissing, he looks down at me over his rapidly expanding chest.

"How's this for predictable?" I glare before taking him as deep as I can. His velvety-smooth length glides in, and my plan backfires. He feels incredible in my mouth, hot, hard and momentarily at my mercy. I suck, hollowing my cheeks to gain full traction over every inch.

His head lolls. "Fuuuuuck, Zara, again." He shifts, his feet gaining more stability and grips my hair, encouraging my bobbing. He groans, thrusting deeply and denying me a reprieve. Holding still, he allows me to recover my breathing before he does it repeatedly until I'm wheezing at his feet, and he is sweating. I bare my teeth, grazing them up his length until I feel him swell, and I hum at the sensation. "God damn you and your damn mouth," he snarls, yanking himself free. His thumb drags over my lips. I move to take him again, but he stops me. "Don't. I need a minute." It's then that I realise he is shaking.

"Calla-"

"Zara, don't. I'm angry with need. I'm fucking mad as hell with you, and I want to hurt you," he admits furiously. He drops his head against the lift. "Fuck, I want to hurt you so badly." I blink, shocked by his words. Violent sexual images attack my brain, but so does my memory of Oscar's broken body.

"Like Oscar?" I whisper. Oh god, does he get off on things like that? I move away, slowly pulling the remains of my dress around me.

"What? No. Jesus, Zara!" He twists, his arms still planted on the wall, his face now taking in my rumpled state. His eyes are wild.

"What do you mean?" I whisper.

"I don't know. I've never felt like this before. I can't fucking think straight. I want to fuck you hard, painfully hard. Like I need to crawl inside and own you," he admits raggedly. "I want to tan your arse and bite your perfect fucking tits. I want to ram so deeply you cry and crumble for me, and I hate you for making me feel like this. You piss me the fuck off, and I want to punish you for it," he spits, dropping his head forwards. I want him with the same ferocity. I certainly don't want him to slap me about, but I

don't mind his roughness during sex. It's a refreshing change from being pampered all the time. It reminds me I'm strong. I feel awakened every time, as though I can take on the world.

"Maybe I want that too," I say quietly.

"Zara," he warns. I press the button, and we continue gliding up. "Do. Not. Tempt. Me," he hisses.

"When this stops, I'm getting out, and you need to give me time to either get my things to go home for the night or give me time to prepare for a night of giving you what you need," I say, soft but sure.

"By making it your choice, it doesn't make it any easier to accept I'm losing control with you." He laughs unstably.

"Well, I lost my control to you. The least you could do is give me a little back and let me choose this," I say simply and step to the door as the elevator slows. I'm not sure whether to grant Callan space or the kind of sex he so desperately needs. I've never judged anyone for their sexual preference, and although I haven't given it much thought, I know I'm not into any kind of kink, or at least I think I'm not. I should leave.

The doors whoosh open, and I slip free, breathing heavily.

Chapter Nineteen

I race towards his bedroom and grab a clean dress, but the sight of the bed and what could happen in it makes me stop. Even if I go home tonight, there is always tomorrow or the next day and the next. It's inevitable, and I begrudgingly admit I can't think of anyone who I would feel more comfortable experimenting with than him.

I look at the dress in my hands and my bedraggled state and, dropping the clean dress, I remove the torn one and my bra. I kick my foot back to take my heels off, but stop and smirk. I hear him now, moving quickly through the penthouse. I dash onto the bed on all fours and place my hands over my head so my chest is flush to the mattress, and arch my arse as high as I can manage, baring myself fully for when he walks in. I'm panting, both excited and nervous. I bite my lip and whimper. I'm so aroused—so far removed from any place I have mentally been before. He's freeing me bit by bit.

Footsteps approach, soft and determined. They stop. A choke behind me has me blowing out a stream of nervous air and my toes curling in my heels.

"I'd kill for you, Zara Reid." His puzzlement is evident in his tone, and knowing I am the cause sends a ripple of pleasure through me.

"Callan, please." I wiggle my arse. I need him now. I'm embarrassed by myself, but he needs this, and I think I do too.

Three quick strides and his palms clash roughly with my hips. My face flames. I never knew I could be so wanton. "Shy and filthy, no wonder I'm a mess." Massaging my arse, he hauls me backwards and runs his hand down my spine until he is holding my neck still. I can feel the heat of him pressed against my backside. "I've always liked my women meek and submissive. I can do what I want and leave with little contact. But you," he runs his hands everywhere until I'm trembling, "you bring out a fire in me. You push your fucking luck every damn time." He shudders, and I reciprocate with my own tremble.

“You like it,” I say, pressing back into him. “God, Callan, please touch me.”

“Not like this. I like looking at you, angel.” He flips me, and his palm swings down, slapping between my legs. I cry out, but before I can react to the sting at the apex of my thighs, Callan is ripping me towards him and surging upwards, entering me forcefully. “Take it!” he roars. I squirm at the intrusion, but it soon flips to blind pleasure.

“More,” I cry, dragging my nails down his arms. His mouth finds any available skin, and his teeth and tongue both hurt and soothe me. I’m a mess of emotions, sobbing and pleading, as he fucks his anger out. I match him, unleashing my own anger, the unfairness life has thrown at me, the restraint this man has implemented on my life, the lack of control I’ve faced over the years all comes out, competing with his demons.

“You’re heaven and hell, Zara damn Reid,” he pants wide-mouthed, brow furrowed, eyes lost on our most secret parts.

“I’m close, please,” I cry, sinking my nails deeply, so he barks out and juts into me.

“Get your hands around my fucking neck.” He huffs, his brow sweating, his eyes far away. My body aches—each touch and roll brings a new position—a new level of intensity. I’m riding him with vigour, whimpering and clambering for completion. I press into his neck, my small hands spanning his throat. I slam home, sinking down his length, and his tongue travels up my neck, and I splinter, taking him with me into the most earth-shattering orgasm.

~

We’re in the bath. Callan’s arms are resting on either side, and my neck is lying over one, my legs the other, and my bum is draped in his lap. I’m dabbing bubbles along his chin to make a fake beard. Once he is St. Nick worthy, he lifts his brow, and a burst of laughter flies out of my mouth at the absurdity of him. He drops forward and rubs his face over mine, covering me in bubbles. I squeal and push him away, finding he is smiling openly at me. Unexpected pain hits my chest, and I dip my gaze, disguising my frown. Day-by-day, hour-by-hour, this man is cementing himself into my heart, and it pains me to know I won’t see him again, so much so that it rivals the pain of leaving Oscar. I lift a drenched flannel, wring it dry, and place it over his mouth, and his lips quirk because he knows what’s coming.

I manoeuvre around until I can raise up on my knees, and I tilt his head back and kiss him roughly, my tongue pushing against the material and into his mouth. He groans loudly, and I deepen it before I break away on a pant. Callan's face twists with emotion. Is he angry with me? He didn't push me away. Groaning, he grips my chin, yanking me close so our lips are almost touching. Excitement rushes through me. He's going to kiss me. Callan is panting, his jaw flexing, and then he drops my face and pulls his tattooed hand down his own. I search his gaze, but his eyes shutter closed, refusing me access to his thoughts. Disappointment burns in my gut, and my smile is sad.

"Do you think before this month ends you'll let me kiss you?" I muse.

He shrugs, fighting a smirk. "You just did," he tells me, twisting me quickly so I'm splashing between his thick thighs. He is too big for this bath, and it makes me smile.

"No, I mean skin on skin."

"I don't know." His hands cup my throat, and his thumb rubs rhythmically along my pulse. That's not a no.

"I just find it strange you're happy to contract an STI, but we can't kiss?" I frown back at him, pointing out how absurd his rule is.

He laughs loudly and shifts under me. "I know you're clean. I checked, remember," he scoffs.

"What else did you check?"

"Everything. I know it's your birthday next month." I blink and try not to stiffen. I had no intention of telling him that even when he mentioned Oscar's birthday being at Nexo. "I also know you don't like sweetcorn and your favourite colour is ocean blue, not red like most people think," he delivers. "I know you like me fucking you, and the rougher I am, the harder you come." I jab him with my elbow, but this just makes him chuckle harder.

"I don't feel like I know anything about you," I admit, feeling at a disadvantage.

"You know more than most."

"Really," I scoff.

"Well, you know where I live for a start."

"Well, I kind of have to. I'm living there for the next twenty days," I mutter, pinching his hand when it tweaks my nipple. "I don't know anything

other than your clubs, your rules, and that you don't like being kissed.” I pout.

“I told you I don't drink,” he adds. Yes, he did, but that’s hardly insightful.

“What’s your favourite colour?” I ask, genuinely intrigued.

“Whatever colour you happen to be wearing on the day you’re wearing it.”

“Regular charmer, you.” I smirk. “Okay, when is your birthday?”

“December first. I’ll be thirty-seven.” I nod, happy with this information. I know we’ll be worlds apart by then, but I plan to get a gift to him somehow. I chew my lip, trying to think of other questions. “Don’t tell me my age bothers you?” he chortles.

“You’re hardly sporting a walking stick and false teeth. It doesn’t bother me.” I’m giggling at the vision I just described as his fingers dig into my hip, and I fly up.

“No, stop!” I laugh.

He is laughing too, and he looks so carefree, so handsome. He stops and sighs at me.

“Why did you have to turn out to be so complicated?” He frowns, his tone flat. He cups my face and runs his thumb over my lips, taking his time, all the while gazing at my mouth, and sighs heavily. Kiss me! My heart feels heavy. I don't want to get my hopes up. Callan and I are two very different people. In another life, maybe this would have led somewhere, but we both know I’m leaving. His hand falls away, and his expression becomes shuttered.

“Why’d you turn out to be so shady?” I question back, and he grins, his mood quickly dismissed.

He holds our stare for a moment before looking out onto the city. His forehead becomes taut as he mulls whatever is bothering him over in that complex mind of his.

“You ready to get out? You've got an early shoot.” I’ve learnt Callan has no issues with delving into my privacy and going through my phone—he claims it’s to sync our calendars so he can make the most out of this month. “Stalin will drop you off and collect you.”

“Okay, thanks.” I have given up fighting. It's a month of my life, that's all, and after the anxiety I have endured, it’s nice to have everything planned for me. I have no worries if it’s all Callan-approved, plus I feel

safer knowing he is so dedicated to my whereabouts. It means I'm safe from Santino and Ramis. The last two weeks under Callan's watch have been pretty stress free.

Callan lifts me out, and I pull down two big towels, passing one to him. I wrap up and walk through to his bedroom. It may be a temporary situation, but he has made me feel at home—my things are around, odd things here and there, and although I have tried to keep it all in a bag, Callan tells me to leave it.

I brush out and dry my hair whilst he goes off to his office. He spends an hour most nights in there. I don't interrupt him, as I know he will never disclose any information to me. Pulling a top on, I go and curl up on the sofa to watch a movie.

I'm dozing when I sense him nearby. I lay still, expecting him to come and wake me, but he moves quietly about the place. I hear his footsteps retreating down the hall and then the main door clicking shut, and I sit up slowly, blinking to force wakefulness into me. Where is he going?

I tiptoe down the hall and see the elevator going down to the car park. I check the time, finding it is nearly one in the morning. I frown and contemplate my next move. I could follow him down, but for all I know the door could open, and he will still be there, and I don't much fancy talking my way out of that. Instead, I decide to make a quick dash to his office. I push on the door, but it's locked. I huff out my annoyance and walk back, checking if the elevator is ascending. I don't want to seem too keen, and I consider that he is probably out trying to begin putting things in motion for when I do my disappearing trick. Soon, that photo taken of us will be front-page news, and the Russians will get wind of it. Then it's only a matter of time.

I lay awake for the next hour, and Callan is still nowhere to be seen. I wonder how many nights I have been exhausted by him—leaving him the freedom to sneak off into the night. I can't relax knowing he is out there. My curiosity wins, and I grab my phone to call him. He answers on the second ring.

“What's wrong?”

“Where are you? I woke and—”

“Club problem. I won't be long. You okay?” I feel stupid all of a sudden—an unexpected green-eyed monster has reared her ugly head. She's still lingering. I hate the thought of him there with all those women—my mouth

sours, and I hum my response. I have no right to be jealous—he isn't mine. We have an agreement, we never discussed anything further than that, but having first-hand experience of his never tiring sex drive, I feel unease wash over me. It's something I want to iron out, but I feel clingy and insecure doing so now.

“Zara, I can hear you thinking from here. Trust me when I say it's only you.”

I blush and press my lips together, trying to think up a smart response.

“Okay, not sure why you said that,” I murmur, feigning confusion.

“Because you are thinking who is he with, what is he doing, who is he doing?” He breathes out roughly, humour in his voice.

“I'm not sure that's any of my business as long as you're okay,” I say quickly, “see you in the morning.” I cut the call and slam my eyes shut. Stupid, stupid woman. I feel so ashamed. What is wrong with me? My phone vibrates. It's him on FaceTime. I click connect and school my expression. Callan's face comes into view, and the muted pulse of music pumps in the background as the club plays out behind him. As in Nexo, he is shielded by a wide window.

“Hey.” I smile, and he stares at me pointedly through the phone, fighting a smile. I cover the camera with my hand. “Don't look at me like that,” I whine.

“Like what? Like you're jealous, and that I fucking like it, that I like it enough to point it out to you.” He's smug as hell.

“Yes, like that,” I grumble, moving my hand away to find him smiling widely at me.

“I won't be long,” he tells me.

Nodding, I tuck my hair behind my ear, then stop, letting it drop away.

“Sure, I'm going to bed,” I say, my eyes dipping away.

“Hey,” he calls, getting my attention again, “you always wanted to kiss me, now's your chance.” He smirks. I smile at the screen and his darkening jaw. He pouts, and I drop a kiss on my screen.

“Night, Callan.”

“Night, angel.”

~

I wake to the sound of the shower running. I never heard Callan return last night, so I'm not sure he even did. I touch his side of the bed and find

it's cold. Has he been up all night? I walk to the en-suite, finding him standing under the spray. I move behind the glass and see all the marks marring his skin, scratches from me.

"It's a good job that I know you're there. I could have shot you," he quips in warning.

"Like you bring a gun in the—" He lifts his hand, revealing his gun. "Oh."

"Join me." Such a simple command, and yet my heart picks up. I move in fully and lift my face to the spray. The water pummels my skin, and after our sex marathon, it feels good. "You're pretty bruised, Zara, perhaps you should cancel your shoot."

"Did you forgo work because I scratched you up?" I say, flicking a look up at him, and he grins down at me.

"No, although you have most of my members at Skyn aimlessly searching for the woman who shed my blood." His neck is littered in dark red marks.

"I thought you were at Hex?" I say, shampooing my hair. Wasn't that where he was when we Facetimed? Is that why he didn't come home? Was he telling the truth when he said it was just me he is involved with?

"You know we're not exclusive, right?" he says, and I go stone cold. My hands stop what they're doing, and I stare at the marbled wall in fury. He was out fucking another woman. I turn slowly and glare at him.

"I do know that, Callan, but we're not using protection, and you may be more than happy to herpy it up, but I'm not!" I impart icily.

"I'm only fucking you." He laughs, his big chest vibrating. He smirks at me and steps out of the shower.

"So why goad me, then?" I huff, trying to cool my yo-yo temper—a temper he seems to have invisible control of.

"Because jealous you is sexy. It's never been a secret that I own Skyn or that I frequent there," he states calmly. Frequent as in for pleasure and not just business? I catch sight of another smirk.

"You're trying to goad me again, but I know you don't fraternise with the women there and anyway, they all know your rules," I announce, enjoying his frown. I turn my back on him. Ha, take that! Well, apart from Katryna, the psycho.

A swift palm hits my arse, making me yelp.

“The women don't know my rules. I've never discussed it with them,” he gloats.

“Maybe not, but one of them overheard you propositioning a woman and giving her your one night, no kiss, fuck fest rule,” I tell him, enjoying how his brows pull with surprise. He recovers quickly, probably filing it away for future use.

“Fuck fest. For a shy thing, you have a filthy mouth.” Thick arms wrap around my waist. “Plus, I fuck and flee,” he admits on a laugh, “fuck fests are reserved for yours truly.” He nips my shoulder. “What else did the women say?” he wonders.

“I don't know. They blabbed to Oscar, not me. He never uttered your name until I came into the club.”

“Seems he can't keep it shut now,” he grumbles.

“Your *women* blabbed first.”

“Yes, well, they will be reprimanded. They know not to discuss me ever.” He can't be for real.

“Callan, you're their boss. Of course they will talk about you with each other, and if you have forgotten, Oscar worked for you not that long ago. It's a discussion between employees, not employees to public,” I say, washing myself quickly and turning the water off.

“This conversation feels too domesticated,” he mutters, handing me a towel.

I laugh, sneaking a look at his nakedness behind my dripping hair. “Well, I can always go home.” I smirk at him and pull the towel around my body.

“You're a real comedian,” he retorts, leaving the en-suite and allowing me the privacy I need to pee.

Chapter Twenty

It doesn't take the papers long to share pictures of Callan and me leaving Nexo. The headline 'Model Mystery' is printed in large font, and below the caption continues:

London's top model may finally be off the market. Zara Reid was seen leaving Nexo with mysterious nightclub owner Callan Scott. Scott, who looks more like a security guard, was seen yesterday escorting Miss Reid from his high-rise bar in the early evening. A witness says Mr Scott was very tactile with the model, and the pair were seen leaving together. A source confirms Miss Reid met with the owner to look at possible venues for her closest friend, Oscar Winters', upcoming birthday. Winters can often be found perusing high-end boutiques, bars, or on Zara's arm. He is the most attractive accessory a girl could have. No further sightings have been noted.

My phone rings minutes after I receive the news notification. Miranda's name flashes, and I suck in a breath, waiting for her to have a minor meltdown.

"It's not what it looks like," I tell her, picking at some fruit in front of me.

"Why the hell not? Where on earth has this man been hiding? Is he really as big as he looks?" she asks in a rush of excitement.

"Honestly, I was thinking about Oscar and noticed this place. Callan was kind enough to show me about and give me a quote."

"And he doesn't have staff for that? Come on, Zara, the man is interested in you," she hums, "you left together—to go where?"

"Oh, this other club he owns, Hex. I looked around them both. It was all very professional and not at all as the tabloids have shown."

"His hand is a thumb width from your arse cheek, and he looks like he could eat you," she spits happily, "please tell me it wasn't all professional."

"Afraid so and no longer a surprise for Oscar." I sigh.

“You are absolutely no fun. I will get back to the press and just smooth things over, confirming what is already printed.”

“Reiterate how professional it was,” I say, biting into a strawberry. The juice trickles down my chin, and Callan’s hand clasps my face, tilts it and licks the juice. His tongue flicks just shy of my lips, and I stare breathlessly at him. He winks, grabs a strawberry, and pops it whole in his mouth. I hadn’t even heard him enter the room.

He presses his lips to my ear. “Professional enough for you?” he purrs. I squirm and close my eyes, trying not to let my voice falter when I hear Miranda ask if he made a move. I contemplate telling her I think he is gay for a laugh, but I think he would spank me arse bright red.

“No, I think he is involved with someone.”

“Shame,” Miranda muses, “you look good together.”

“He’s not really my type,” I lie. His hand snakes around and squeezes my breast. I jump and try to pull free, but his hand tightens, and I bite my lip at the slow increase of pain.

“He’s everyone’s type!” Miranda barks incredulously down the line. Callan rolls his eyes and leaves me to the yapping of my agent.

“Maybe,” I murmur. “Any news from Georgie?” I ask, trying to move the conversation in a different direction.

“Oh yes, he sent an update this morning, but the whole buff man with tats sidetracked me. Here, let me find it,” her voice trails off, then returns just as quickly. “Do you think he is mafia?” she suddenly asks.

“Who, Georgie? Highly unlikely,” I joke.

“No. Callan Scott. I bet his clubs have an influx of women now.”

“Well, when we celebrate Oscar’s birthday, maybe you will get to meet him,” I say absently. I’m not even sure this party will even go ahead. “Oh, bring Phil with you, too,” I add, trying to seem as normal as ever.

“Oh sure, Phil, meet Callan, the man I want to fuck.” Her scoff has my ear ringing.

“Miranda!”

“Oh Zara, as if you are immune to him. The guy is gorgeous and rough and just delicious.” She goes on to say.

“Do you have Georgie’s email?”

“He is sending over the final version of the video at the end of this week.”

“Great, look, I have to go. I have a shoot.”

“I know,” she clips. “You have plenty of time,” she mutters, keeping me on the phone to try and gain more information on Callan.

~

The next few nights follow a similar pattern. I force myself to stay partially alert and find that, as suspected, Callan is slipping out at night. I try not to let my mind erupt with a tandem of thoughts of his whereabouts. His businesses do, of course, run between evening and morning. He must be napping at the clubs. No one can endure as much sex as we have, then work hours on end and keep working through the night. I feel more guilt for having loaded him with my own problems. Maybe this is why he asked that I move in so that he has access that being at mine wouldn't allow. I need to nip home tomorrow just to check my post and collect some more clothes. Stalin has already been back twice, but I want to see the place myself and check all is okay.

Widening my eyes, I try to fight off the lethargy pulling at me. I really want to sleep, but I also want to wait to see what time Callan decides to rock up. I watch the TV, hardly paying attention to what is even happening, and keep an ear out for the main door. Hours pass, and I'm drifting, my head lolling and snapping up as I fight the deep need to rest. No matter how hard I resist, at some point in the early hours, I give in.

A loud bang splinters through the apartment, making me jump awake in a panic.

“ZARA!” someone shouts raggedly. I blink, trying to clear the fog in my brain. “Zara!” Callan's pained voice carries through the apartment and bounces off the walls. I stagger up and head towards the main entrance, but he beats me into the main living area. My hand flies to my mouth, and I gasp, horrified by the view before me.

Blood. So much blood.

“Oh god, what happened?” I choke, rushing to him, unsure where the blood is coming from. I don't know where I can touch, where to start first, what I'm supposed to do? I sob, panicked, and jolt into shock. I can't move. Can't think. I stutter and silently beg him to help me. Help me, even though it's him who is bleeding on the floor and showing a pallor to his skin that has me severely worried.

“First aid,” he puffs, stumbling to a chair and sitting down. He goes floppy, and I grab him, groaning in protest at his challenging weight. He

rights himself and tries to cup my face, but misses. “The kit.”

“Where is it?” I stumble about, dragging cupboards and drawers open. I clatter about, knocking things over as I look for anything that resembles a first aid kit.

“En-suite,” he grunts painfully. I rush off, but not before looking back to see he is trying to remove his shirt. He curses and my stomach revolts at all the blood dripping on the tiles. I pound into the en-suite and pull the few cupboards open, sagging in relief when I find the box. I nearly drop it in my haste to get back to him and discover that when I do return, I’m not prepared for what I witness. There is a deep, seeping wound in his shoulder, where a sizable chunk of flesh is missing and another laceration to his side. A knife wound, perhaps, or maybe he was shot. I whimper, terrified by the mess he is in. It looks like a bullet grazed his side.

“Oh, god, Callan, what do I do?” I dump the kit on the side and begin pulling things out, holding them out for him.

“Stitch me up,” he laughs hollowly. He’s in a lot of pain. His black gaze is flat and dilated. “The bullet barely skimmed me,” he pants.

“What!” I screech. I’m not stitching him up. “I’m not stitching you up!” I cry. This is madness. “You’ve been shot. Oh, god, you’ve been shot... Shit.” I baulk and grip the side, my legs weakening at what is transpiring around me. “They’re here.” I go ashen.

“No, not them. They’re not here. I need you to focus. Sterilise the wounds, and your hands,” he grunts between short pants, “stitch me up.” His shaky hand lifts to the kit. Blood is seeping steadily out of the wounds. How can I do anything when there is so much blood?

“Where is Stalin?” I’m crying now, shaking visibly. I desperately need for this all to be a big, nasty dream.

“Cleaning up.” He flattens me with a stare that dries my stomach raw. That’s code for the other person getting off far worse. I nod and huff, grabbing the pure alcohol and struggling with the lid. As soon as I have it off, Callan yanks it from me, stiffening at the pain it causes him to move before he pours it down his stomach, hissing, then lifts a wobbly hand to his injured arm and does the same. “Hands,” he orders, his voice a low hiss. Mine are shaking just as bad as his.

“Don’t make me do this,” I whisper fearfully. My lips are dry. I feel sick.

“You need to. Come on, Zara. You can do this.”

“But what if you need more than stitches? Your arm,” I whimper.

“Bullet went clean through. It grazed the edge of my muscle. I’ll heal,” he bites, “grab a needle.” He nods to the kit. I grab what I can and thread the needle. Callan reaches for some sterile bandage and holds it to his arm, slowing the bleeding. “The gash,” he grunts, nodding to his side.

I nod. I can do this.

“I can do this,” I say quietly.

“You can, baby, come on,” he encourages softly. I bite my lip and move in, and he leans to give me access.

“I’m sorry,” I say before I pierce the skin with the hooked needle. Callan doesn’t move, never flinches, and barely speaks as I thread the needle in and out of his skin.

“You’re doing good, last bit. Tie it off.” He gasps. My shaking hand accidentally tugs, pulling at the wound, and his nostrils flare.

“Sorry, sorry,” I say in a panic. Callan, although pale and clearly in pain, gives me a reassuring wink. I’m cutting the thread when Stalin barrels in, his eyes wide and face also ashen.

“Oh, thank God. He needs stitching,” I say on a short blub, grateful that he is here now.

“I’ll do you a deal. You clean me up, and I’ll sort his wound,” Stalin tells me.

“You’re hurt too?” This is a nightmare. He takes the seat beside Callan and grabs his hand, pulling him in for a quick but gentle slap on the back. Both men drop their foreheads together in solidarity, an unspoken brotherhood. They have been through hell tonight. For me? I daren’t ask. I can’t cope with that truth. I step back and allow them a moment.

After a few moments, Stalin pulls back, shrugging his suit jacket off. Next, his shirt is removed, which is saturated in blood too.

“I’m not a nurse!”

“Tony is on his way. Just clean it until he gets here,” Stalin advises me. He turns his attention to Callan’s upper arm, where the chunk is missing. A flimsy bit of skin is keeping his arm from forming a clean hole. A millimetre to the right, and it would simply be a sizable crevice. I swallow bile and breathe through my nose as I pour alcohol over Stalin’s waist.

“Fuck!” he snaps.

“Oh, sorry, applying alcohol,” I whisper, blushing deep crimson. Callan laughs, then grunts in pain. A loud knock sounds at the door, and I jump away, expecting the police to charge in and arrest us all.

“That’s Tony,” Stalin tells me. I nod and rush off, swearing when I get to the door, finding my hands are tainted with blood. I yank the handle open, not even saying hello and rush back, noticing bloody prints on the marble floor.

“They’re here,” I stammer. Now Tony is here to take over, I start to find things to clean the floor with, but Callan tugs me to him.

“Stop,” he says softly.

I hiccup, sob, and burst into tears. He lifts me with a hiss of pain and sits me on his lap, and hugs me to his chest.

“I can’t do this. This is too much.” Flashes of memories—the smell, it takes me back to that awful night. Seeing his wounds only adds fuel to the painful recollection of what happened to my father—what could have happened to me all those years ago. I wrap my arms around his neck and snuffle into his neck.

“Don’t move,” Tony says gruffly. We both nod and stay locked together as he works on both Callan and Stalin. The apartment is quiet. The only sound is the odd involuntary hiccup from me.

“Are you wearing my jumper?” Callan finally breaks the silence. I twist, hiding my face further from all three sets of eyes.

“I don’t like being here alone,” I confess. Callan grins into my hair and nips me playfully, and sitting back, I blink at him. “What happened?” An uneasy tension fills the room, reminding me it’s none of my business and that I have absolutely no right to ask such things.

“Got shot.” Callan grins. Both Stalin and Tony laugh. Shaking my head, I move, checking to see if my stitches have held. I wiggle to get down.

“At least let me know if this is because of me?” I chance a guilty glance around the room.

“This is business. It has nothing to do with you,” Callan reassures me. I hum and hug my waist. I’m not sure I believe him. It’s too much of a coincidence.

Tony stands and throws a bloody rag onto the pile of bloody garments on the floor. “I’ll clean up. Zara, you probably need a sugary drink. You look pretty pale.” His comment is met by a flare of admiration from Callan.

I nod, still robotic and jittery. I never drink sugary drinks, but Callan does have honey here, so I make myself a green tea with lemon and honey.

“Does anyone else want a drink?” I ask quietly.

“Black coffee for me,” Tony says, pulling a bin bag from the cupboard and dumping the shirts and sodden bandages in.

“Water for me,” Callans says.

“I’ll have a vodka,” Stalin states. I look at Callan. Does he even have alcohol here?

“Bottom right cupboard,” he tells me. I make the drinks, conscious I’m still shaking, but as soon as I start sipping on my drink, I do feel calmer. We all move to sit on the sofas, Callan pulls me into his lap, and I finally relax. Tony eyes us curiously, but I try not to pay him any mind. Once my drink is finished, I cradle the warm cup in my hands and lean into Callan’s good shoulder. The combination of my tiredness from earlier and the shock and adrenaline has exhausted me. My eyes flutter, and I shake my head, trying to stay away, but Callan’s good hand begins massaging the back of my neck, and I’m drifting before I can protest that I’m fine.

~

I wake in the same position I pointlessly argued with Callan about last night when we finally moved to the bedroom. I was, and still am, concerned I will damage his stitches or hurt him. He is breathing shallowly, my leg draped over his and held in his grasp, my neck resting on his good arm. He is pale, and I gently press my hand to his forehead to check for a fever. He must have lost so much blood. He does seem a little clammy. When he carried me to bed last night, I had fought with sleeping in the spare room or on the sofa, but in true Callan style, he dragged me to him, demanded I stop being a brat and to go to sleep. Staring at him now, I experience a flare of worry. Under both eyes are dark circles, and his usual ceaseless energy is flunking. I ease free and chew my lip with fear when he doesn’t even flinch. I nip to the toilet in a hurry, then decide to go in search of Stalin.

I hear voices before I even make it to the main living area. Two voices. Tony and Stalin.

“Nial will have the Range back by noon. It was in a pretty bad state.”

“I pretty much sat in a puddle of blood on the way back,” Stalin complains.

“We need to double our manpower at the ports.” Tony’s voice raises, and Stalin shushes him.

“It’s done. Cal knew things were getting strained, but we never expected them to steal from us,” Stalin retorts.

“At least we procured the package. The blow was a diversion. They knew we were hitting Denver’s container. Someone must have told them,” Tony spits. “Some fucker is double-crossing us,” he snarls, and the sound of a bottle hitting the coffee table with force makes me jump.

The chair groans as someone moves. I press my body against the wall, breathing quietly, as I listen to their private conversation.

“I’m not sure. The men are loyal to Callan. We all owe him too much.” That’s Stalin again.

“Then what? This is about money. Why else jeopardise those poor fucking women? They are the worst I’ve ever seen. Two died.” Tempers flare, and I can feel the tension, even from here.

“We’ve been intercepting drops for how long? It’s the same with every trafficker: someone rises to the helm. and Callan cuts them a new one.” Stalin sounds tired. Trafficking. I cup my mouth and snap my eyes shut. They’re involved in trafficking. All those women at Skyn with their soulless eyes and lack of morals—this is how Callan makes his money? My skin feels alive with sickness, as though a thousand disease-ridden bugs are festering all over me. I want to wash it off—wash him off. Rid myself of him. I drag in a deep lungful of air. I need to leave. I have to go. It all makes sense now: the lack of respect for women, the disdain and impatient attitude towards women. Was he going to sell me off? It makes me sick to my stomach. Stepping back quietly, I begin to head back to Callan’s room when I overhear Stalin adding, “Most will be relocated or reunited with their families within the next week. Saving them is worth the bullet holes.”

“Maybe longer. Some of them need medical attention,” Tony pipes up.

“It will be the same old story: some stay, some go. As long as they aren’t being drugged and used as a fucking sex toy, I don’t care. Callan doesn’t care. They’ve been saved from a life of misery; anything after that isn’t our business.” I sag, swallowing a whimper of relief, and my terrible mind tramples me with remorse. I can’t believe for a few minutes I believed such ill of these men. So they’re not procuring women—they are saving them.

“Any new intel from the members? I know Cravos visited Skyn last night.”

“Yeah, he made a deal with Peters, nothing that concerns us.” Stalin heaves as he gets up, and I quickly tiptoe back towards the master bedroom, then walk down the hall as though I’ve not just eavesdropped in on their conversation. Stalin appears, looking peaky as hell. I’d been so stunned by

their conversation, I had completely forgotten why I was hurrying to get him. Callan.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Callan looks off, pale,” I say quietly. Like you, I want to add, but don’t. Callan is putty-coloured compared to Stalin, and I’m sure he lost more blood.

“Okay, I’m coming,” he says. He stares at me and clears his throat. “Maybe put some more clothes on.” His suggestion sends my cheeks pink. I’m wearing a camisole and thong.

“Shit. Yes.” I hurry back to Callan and search his walk-in wardrobe. I pick up a pair of gym shorts, tugging them on just in time. Both men wander in, and we all stand over Callan. “I mean, usually he’d have leapt up by now and pointed his gun at us,” I whisper, eyeing them both.

Stalin walks around to lean and press a hand to him.

“Tone, give Jefferson a call. He may need a transfusion.” Tony doesn’t wait for further information. He is pulling his phone out and talking rapidly into it. Stalin persists with lifting Callan’s eyelids and nudging him. “Cal, can you hear me? Wake up, you stubborn fucker.”

Nothing.

“Oh, God. We should have done something last night. We left him all this time,” I say tearfully. What if he dies? I crawl onto the bed and try to wake him, too. “Callan, open your eyes. Can you hear me? You’re scaring me?” After a few minutes and the barest of mumbles from Callan, we are waiting tensely for this Jefferson bloke to arrive. I can’t help but pace. I move from him to the en-suite and back again. I’m too scared to touch him, terrified to be too far away, and his pallor is rapidly decreasing. The door goes thirty minutes later, and Tony leaves the room to let Jefferson in.

Two heavy sets of feet pound down the hall and come rushing in. Without a word, both of Callan’s men begin putting together an IV stand and the new guy, Jefferson, who is tall, bald, and aged, begins taking Callan’s vitals. He is focused only on the man in the bed.

“Pulse is weak. He has a low fever too.” He looks up, and his eyes fall still on me.

“I stitched his stomach. I didn’t know what I was doing. His arm is bad.” I chew my lip and drop into the wide chair in the corner.

The doctor guy nods. “I’ve seen him in worse conditions. This isn’t his first rodeo.”

“Jefferson!” Stalin snaps.

Without a word, the older man turns his attention back to Callan.

“He needs antibiotics and possibly a transfusion. I’ll administer antibiotics first and then an intravenous of fluid. If that doesn’t do the trick, then we’ll look at a transfusion. I have his blood type on hand,” he says before moving about to hang the drip and insert a cannula into his arm.

The room is silent and tense as we all wait around for Callan to miraculously spring back into action.

“How much blood loss?” Jefferson asks.

“A lot,” Stalin admits gruffly, eyeing me cautiously.

“Car was swimming in blood, and the place looked massacred when I arrived last night,” Tony adds carelessly.

“Oh god.” I breathe, rubbing my stomach. There was so much blood, but the place is spotless now. If it weren’t for the unconscious man in the bed, no one would suspect a thing.

“Tony, get Zara a drink before she passes out,” Stalin snaps, his tone warning the other man to keep his tongue in check. With an irritated look in my direction, Tony stalks off, and silence settles once more.

Although Jefferson is here for Callan, I can’t help but worry about Stalin, too.

“Will he be okay?” I ask, looking at Jefferson.

“Sure will. He’s in good health. Nothing some meds and rest won’t cure.” He is polite and concise, clean and kind. I would never assume or suspect he was messed up with the likes of these three criminals. His own shock at my presence makes me think he feels the same about me.

“Okay, good.”

“You’ll get your freedom,” Stalin spits, firing daggers at me. My mouth drops open and morphs quickly into an angry scowl.

“I wasn’t concerned about that!” I shout back. “Stalin was injured. He looks pale too and probably needs checking over,” I say in a rush to the doctor and head out of the room. I can’t be in there, not when Callan is so lifeless. His silence and unresponsiveness reminds me just how human he really is. He’s always seemed larger than life, immortal and untouchable

that I forgot he is just a man. He bleeds like the rest of us, and seeing him in such a state gives me the wake-up call I need to realise turning to him for help was a selfish and cowardly thing to do. I should fight my own battles. Win my own wars. Escape my own past without inflicting harm on others. I find Tony in the kitchen and slip onto the stool. Wordlessly, he passes my green tea.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” He doesn’t even look at me, but walks off back to his boss. Does he blame me? Is this related to Yovenko’s? Why won’t they tell me if the Russians are here in London?

Either way, with the current tension bubbling at an unsavoury level, it’s no secret that I’m unwanted here. Stalin’s usual passive demeanour has gone, and Tony has jumped on the bandwagon.

I give all the men a wide berth and decide to make some breakfast for everyone. It’s early, and even though I feel weak with nausea, I know I need to eat. I rummage through the cupboards for a few minutes, looking at what I have to work with, deciding on banana pancakes. I mix up the batter, mashing the bananas in whilst the pan heats and wash a mix of berries. Setting the table quickly with coffee, honey, and cutlery, I begin pouring the mixture in as all three men filter out. Their chatter ceases, and Stalin takes the lead, pulling a chair out and sitting down. Wordlessly, I fill up a plate with pancakes and place it in the middle of the table.

As soon as Callan is okay, I know I need to leave. I can’t allow myself to put them in danger. I’ve worried endlessly about the photograph of me and Callan and how it will implicate him, and now I have my answer. I will make sure Callan goes ahead with the party at Nexo. After that, I can walk away and resume my life in the limelight. I was naïve and stupid to think that I could do this and actually get away with it. Maybe fate already intervened, and I was always supposed to be in this life—this is my path. Maybe some higher power believes I am owed a grizzly death. I just need to make sure he is okay, and then I will remove myself from this situation, not only because having three sets of untrustworthy eyes on me feels like I’m being poked with acid injected spikes, but knowing that Callan is going to follow through on his promise, and remove me from this life, hurts more than I can cope with right now. Seeing him shot made me realise just how much I had grown to care for him. I honestly thought he was going to die, and my heart was repulsed by the thought of that—of the possibility of him

being out of my life permanently. I can't think of it. Couldn't bear it. If I have to witness him hand me over to a new life without so much as a second glance, I'd rather face the wrath of the Yovenko's. I'm in love with him. I love his harshness. I love the small amount of kindness he only shares with me when we are alone. I love how peaceful I feel in his presence and that my jaw aches from smiling. I love that no matter how many times I have undressed in front of a camera without so much as experiencing a hint of emotion from my audience, that he can make me feel alive with electric heat from one blistering look. I have stepped out of my skin and donned a new one, one only he can see. One I only want with him. I want to escape the never-ending lights of my current life, but he is a small piece of darkness I want to take with me, and I can't.

"Thanks," Stalin says gruffly. I look up, being pulled out of my thoughts, but I can't muster a smile. I'm flooded with pain, pain that rivals that of when I lost my father.

The distinct sound of someone kicking someone else fills the quiet.

"Yeah, ta," Tony mutters.

Jefferson smiles at me. I only allow our eyes to connect briefly. I otherwise keep my face down as I load up a few berries onto my plate and drizzle a little honey over my pancakes. The men begin talking, mainly about Callan and what they expect for him in the next twenty-four hours. I don't comment, silently grateful for an update.

Stalin's deep voice pulls my head up once more. "Zara, I'm sorry for reacting as I did." His calm and concise voice settles any further conversation as all three sets of eyes turn to me.

Shrugging, I stab a blueberry and pop it in my mouth, chewing, but not tasting.

"You could at least acknowledge him," Tony laughs shortly. He shakes his head disapprovingly across the table at me. He intermittently watches Stalin and me with hard, cynical eyes. Is he expecting the bigger guy to teach me a lesson, knock me about? These men demand respect but never give it out. Tony certainly has never shown me any, and it's obvious Stalin has some reservations about me.

"Why? It's evident you have all made up your minds about me. I've learnt from experience, it's better to say nothing." I push a strawberry around my plate. "You think I'm an air-headed spoilt princess, who is materialistic and selfish, and that's fine." I sigh wearily. I'm so done. I've

had enough of plastic people and envious eyes. I never want to look down the lens of a camera again. I wanted to live for so long, and now that Callan has begun to make it possible, I'm terrified of living alone. I'm happy to just exist once more. Even if it's for a short while as a retired model until they come. I give up. They can come. I stand tiredly and stare down at my plate. "As soon as Callan is okay, I'm leaving. I know he and I made a deal, but I never thought you'd be in danger or that something like this would happen."

"This had nothing to do with the Russians," Stalin says calmly.

"Maybe not, but they won't be coming for a cup of tea, will they?" I eye him, and his jaw clenches. "You think I'm weak for running now, but I've been running my whole life, Stalin, and perhaps I am weak. I survived my father's murder and the streets at twelve, and I've somehow survived and mastered this fucking industry until now, an industry I have no love for. You think I can't cope with your disapproving stares? I get them daily, but I refuse to put others in harm's way to save myself—not when I don't have anything worth saving or someone to save it for, and I'm okay with that," I say shakily. I turn my eyes to Tony. "So you can keep looking at me like dirt, and you can think what you want of me. I've had to stare back at many people who think like you do, but they have no idea who I am. You have no idea who I am," I spit, "you're too damn blinded to want to learn, and you may be loyal to that man, but you're piss poor company." I laugh scathingly. Tony's fingers tighten around his cutlery, and Jefferson clears his throat. Stalin looks partially regretful but equally mad.

"You finished giving my men a telling off?" Callan laughs painfully from the door. I gawp, sniff, and pelt around the table to him. He must anticipate my hug because he opens his good arm for me.

"I thought you were going to die," I snuffle and press my face into his chest.

"You wish," he coughs, then groans, wobbles, and leans into the door. I try to hold him up, but luckily Stalin is there.

"You should be in bed," Stalin tells Callan sternly.

"Now, I know you care about me, but I'm not ready to take our relationship to the next level." Callan grins. Stalin chuckles loudly and drops his head, shaking it.

"Is he high?" I ask, twisting to look at Jefferson.

"I gave him some morphine. He needs to sleep. His body is weak."

Callan flexes his arm. “Nothing weak about that,” he grins, then licks his dry lips, “my lips are sore. You been kissing me, woman?” He eyeballs me.

“No, I’d never kiss you without your permission. You’d never forgive me,” I say earnestly. Stalin shifts uncomfortably, and my cheeks flame. Tony is eyeing me, so I nod him my way. He comes over, and I slip free, giving him Callan’s good arm.

“Not even a peck?” Callan laughs. This conversation is leaving me feeling more and more insignificant by the second. What must these men think of me, that I’m a whore who made a deal with their boss, a boss who won’t even kiss me?

“No,” I whisper. My cheeks are hotter than Callan’s clammy body was earlier. I eye both men either side of him, feeling their stares right down to my insecure toes, tight on the marble floor.

“I’d have kissed you,” Callan states proudly. He sways, and the men stagger with his weight.

Laughing, I lead the way back to the master suite. “I just bet you would have.”

“What’s this I hear about you leaving?” Callan tries to sound stern, but he is too drugged up to really be able to convey his anger.

“Oh, erm.” Swallowing, I look to Stalin, then back to my black-eyed fiend being lowered and positioned comfortably on the bed. Jefferson is reattaching his IV and checking his vitals. “Well, a few reasons,” I say quietly. Stalin is watching me discreetly whilst Tony is standing, arms folded, legs apart, waiting for me to break my deal. He even lifts his brow menacingly. I lower myself to Callan’s side. He looks sleepy.

“You’re sex on legs, you are, girl.” He grins, his head lolling. Jefferson chuckles before giving Stalin a nod. He’s letting us know he is okay. That Callan will be okay.

I want to laugh, but instead, my mouth turns down, and my eyes fill with a combination of happy and sad tears. This man has no idea the effect he has had on me, that despite being devastated that I need to walk away, I am so thankful to him for giving a little of himself to me, for sharing his home, which has felt nothing short of a sanctuary. For giving me the kind of protection most celebrities pay hundreds of thousands for, for giving me the strength to say no to my agent and allow myself the odd break. These past two weeks, although short, have been the happiest of my adult life. It is the

longest I have gone without feeling crippling fear. It's a small luxury he has given me without even knowing he has done so.

"You're kind of beautiful, too." My smile is mournful. "I'm leaving in a minute, Callan, and I'm not coming back," I whisper, unable to say it any louder.

"We had a deal." He shifts to rise up, but Stalin holds him flat to the bed.

"We did, but I'm breaking it. I can't allow anyone to be hurt because of me. Whatever the Russians have planned for me is for me to deal with."

"Bullshit," he murmurs, the drugs are taking over. He shakes his head and narrows his eyes. "We. Have. A. Fucking. Deal," he spits.

I do laugh now.

"Quite literally," I say and take his hand, only just noticing the few grazes on his knuckles. "The Russians aren't your concern, they're mine, and what will be, will be. I should never have come to you with it. I'm sorry. I'm ready to deal with it now—to deal with what's coming," I say with conviction.

"Where are you going to go?" He almost sounds sarcastic, but with the fringes of sleep pushing in on him, his tone is muddled. He looks over my determined expression. I'm fighting to hold the hurt in.

"I'll work it out. I made a mistake asking this of you. It was a bad idea," I whisper.

"Like hell it is!" he shouts, and the monitor he is attached to beeps frantically.

"I'm sorry, Callan. The deal's off. I'll arrange something myself. I'm sorry to have troubled you with this," I say with a frown, concerned with the rising beep of the monitor.

"What's changed? Have they been in contact? How long was I out?" He is firing questions at Stalin and me, his face twisted in anger. He pushes against Stalin's hold, getting in my face, but I can't look at him. I'll want to stay.

"Nothing happened," I say quietly. "I changed," I admit and press a kiss to my fingertips. Callan's eyes widen when I press them to his lips. "I can't do this. I'm starting to feel things I shouldn't." I drop my hand and stand, looking down at him. He snatches my wrist, but I peel his fingers away.

"Zara, I can make this happen for you, this," his big palm slaps his chest, "this didn't happen because of the Russians. This is just business."

“I know that.” I’m not sure I do, though. Callan would never admit his plans to me.

“I will make this happen. You’ll get a new life. I made you a deal.”

“That’s the problem,” I cup my throat, holding back tears. “I don’t want you to be the one sending me away. It will crush me. I care about you, Callan. I don’t want to, but I do and knowing how easy it will be for you to walk away will hurt me. I need to do this myself.” He looks stunned. His mouth flaps, but he says nothing, his face contorting with rage.

“We had a deal!” he seethes, “you’re mine for a month.” He begins to twist with the intention of getting off the bed. I take an uneven step back, bumping into Tony.

“Deals change,” I call brokenly, moving slowly away from him.

“Not mine!” he roars. “You’re mine, Zara!”

“The deal was off when I fell in love with you,” I whisper. They’re all watching silently, gaining an up-front and private showing to my pain. I catch the sheer shock plastered on his face as my honest words register through his drug-induced state. He isn’t the only one shocked by my admission. Stalin’s eyes flash to mine. Callan is stunned, silent, and I decide it’s best to take my leave.

“I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for me, all of you, and I’m sorry. So sorry.” I eye them all, stumbling my way through my words. I can’t look at Callan for more than a moment. He is, for once, speechless. “Stalin, could you arrange for my things to be sent to mine, please?” My throat thickens, and I know I’m going to cry. “Bye, Callan,” I croak and walk quickly from the room.

I know there are some of my things in the utility room, so I head there and pull some clothes from the dryer. I half expect Callan to be roaring through the apartment, demanding I come back, but the place is silent. My confession was one he never expected to hear. As soon as I’m dressed, I grab my handbag and fly through the door, slamming into Tony on a grunt.

We stare silently at one another. But he surprises me by saying, “Let me drive you home.” I nod through the barrage of tears, ready to fall. We ride the elevator soundlessly, and Tony helps me get in before taking Stalin’s usual place.

It’s not until we are nearing mine that I say, “I suppose you think I’m daft for falling in love with a man who won’t let me kiss him.” My fingers are nervously playing with the strap of my bag. Saying it out loud results in

my stomach curdling with shame. I've been a stupid, stupid woman. He was never going to love someone like me.

"People fall in love for less," he remarks. I hum, nod, and stare out the window. "For what it's worth, he was different with you," Tony states, pulling up outside mine. Some part of me should welcome the sight of the brick Georgian house, with the small matching plant pots and shrubs I proudly placed beside the front door, yet the only emotion I am experiencing is one I wished to never feel again.

"It's not, but thanks," I say softly. How can it be worth anything when he doesn't feel the same? If he was going to make me disappear and walk away without a second thought, cast me aside like I am nothing, I was just someone to pass his time whilst I was having the time of my life. "Thanks for the lift."

I shut the door and make my way up the steps to my front door. I always believed myself strong, resilient, but now I have no emotion left to share, no emotions to give. No energy to even care. I've simply given up. I trudge up the steps, stopping at the door when I hear the car thrum as it pulls away. I have little regard for Tony, but he is the last link to Callan and seeing him drive away makes this all so final. With a sad twist to my mouth, I unlock the door and go in.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Two things alert me, telling me that I'm not alone; one, the subtle essence of male aftershave, the kind of subtleness that tells me it's a few days old, and second, the low purr of music coming from upstairs. I click the door shut loudly, and after a few moments, footsteps sound through the house before Oscar's face appears above, hanging over the bannister.

"Thank god. I'm sorry, but I've moved myself in. Anita is driving me mad!" He rounds the top and jogs down the stairs, his smile wide, happy to see me, but it soon changes the closer he gets. By the time he reaches the bottom step, his face is a mirage of concern. "Zara, god, what's wrong?" The moment his fingers touch my arms, I buckle and sob, letting him hold me tight.

I can't speak, and for a while, we stand like that; me sobbing into his chest, neither speaking. He holds me, kisses my hair every now and again, hushing me as I cry all over him. The feel of his arms around me soon becomes a comfort, and my tears subside. I know he will have lots of questions, but I can't even bring myself to voice anything. Before I meet his eyes, I say quietly, "I can't talk about it."

"He swore you to secrecy then." He huffs his lip, curling with disdain.

Shaking my head, I sigh. "No, I physically can't bring myself to talk about him," I admit on a weak sigh.

"You fell in love with him," Oscar states softly.

"Don't," I sniff. "I thought I could survive him."

"What happened to a month?" My friend questions cautiously.

"The L word happened," I scoff. I've survived this lie for so long, this industry, my own father's death, and yet I can't survive that man. Wiping my eyes, I look to find soft, sad eyes watching me, and shrugging, I hook my arm through his. "Tell me about Anita," I deflect. It's always been my go-to tactic. I'd rather deal with Oscar's issues than get into my own.

"Z, my desperate mother can wait. I'm worried. I've never seen you like this. Ever." He pulls me in for another hug, and I go, dragging in a deep

lungful of air. I breathe in his aftershave, trying to dispel the one scent I've become so used to recently: the one I want to replace and dissolve from my memory. I want to burn our nights to ashes, erode conversations, and replace each second with Callan into a new memory. I want to crawl into my psyche and tear him from my mind and banish him from that space. I feel violent with the need to remove any trace of him from my life, but I'm equally exhausted by heartache.

"I can't, Oscar." As much as I want to rid Callan from my mind, I don't want to share him, either. It may not have been anything to him, but it was something special to me. "You know you should have told me you were staying here." He's my friend, and I love that he sees my home as a sanctuary, but it's still my home.

"I was going to when we met up, but Callan arrived." Oscar pecks my forehead. "Honestly, I've been worried about whatever you and he have going on. I wanted to be here in case you came home." He gives me a sympathetic hug. "I'm glad that I was."

"Let's slob out and eat shit," he declares, steering me into the lounge. Kicking my feet free of my shoes, I scramble onto the sofa, pull the blanket over myself, and plump my pillow. "I'm raiding your cupboards, be back in a sec." Oscar rushes off, and a moment later, I hear doors open and shut, cutlery and tableware hitting the surfaces. It's a good twenty minutes before he emerges again, carrying a big tray. He places it on the coffee table, and I glance at the contents. Any small child would be in additive heaven. Fruit sorbet, mountain-high with sprinkles and chocolate, and a hot chocolate topped with cream and marshmallows. My lip wobbles and Oscar leans in to peck my cheek. He slips below the blanket at the other end, our legs twine together, and his foot gives my foot a gentle squeeze.

"It's true, we will need to work out like Olympic athletes after all this, but it will be worth it, I promise you," he assures. The TV gets put on to some comedy show, and Oscar digs in, and we hardly speak, but only because I can't bring myself to talk. He eats until he feels sick. Me? I'm already too sick to my stomach with heartache to eat anything more than two mouthfuls, plus, I ate at Callan's. Oscar is swirling little patterns on the top of my foot, and, for some reason, I'm overwhelmed with pain again. One deep sigh turns to a snuffle, then a hiccup before I'm sobbing silently into the blanket. The sofa shifts and Oscar is beside me, holding me tightly.

I don't know how much time has passed, but I slowly slip off into an emotionally spent sleep.

~

I wake slowly and reluctantly, something innate telling me I would rather be sleeping. It takes a few moments for the last twenty-four hours to filter back in, each second of yesterday dripping painfully back into place. I twist, pressing my face into the cushion, inhaling through the need to cry again. I don't want to. I allowed myself an evening to break down, but today is a new day, and I can't let my feelings overwhelm me, so I don't. I get up and sit on the edge of the sofa, sucking in a deep and confident, controlling breath. I can do this. I've done it before. I can switch it off just like I did with my father. I can simply shut it down, close off my emotions. I should focus on what's ahead, more importantly, focus on dealing with the Yovenko's. They will come now, and I need to be in the right state of mind to deal with it. There must be a way out of this, something I'm missing, anything. I've had years to come forward about my father's murder, and my silence all this time should be proof enough their disgusting secret is safe with me. However, they still view me as a threat. Why? Pushing up from the sofa, I walk out into the hall and find Oscar and Stalin talking quietly in the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"Returning this." Stalin holds up one of my weekend cases. I guess Callan wasn't as bothered as he made out.

I duck my head, not wanting to show my pain. "Just going to grab a shower," I tell them when Oscar pushes to stand. He nods and eyes the bigger guy, who scowls at me. I rush upstairs and jump in the shower, washing the previous day down the drain. I'm glad to see it go. My face felt so tight, but now I feel fresh-faced and calmer. I dry off and keep my towel wrapped around my hair as I pull on a pair of jeans and a plain white tee. I keep my face free of makeup and spritz my hair with salt spray, allowing it to dry naturally. I refuse to allow anyone to witness my weakness anymore, but more so myself. I am stronger than this. I head downstairs, a smile fixed in place. Both men are still in the kitchen and look me over cautiously.

"Thanks, Stalin, for dropping this back." All my things are in two holdalls on the kitchen side.

"Of course. Oscar, can you give Zara and me a minute?"

My friend grumbles, but I give him a reassuring smile. I don't want to show my hand too soon, so I allow Stalin the room to talk as I make myself a drink. I hold a cup up in an offer, but he shakes his head.

“You leaving isn't just that simple. We're aware of movement from the Russians. Things are already in motion, Zara. We're all involved, despite your sudden refusal to accept help. Your lack of participation makes things complicated.”

“I'm sorry for that,” I say genuinely. I hold Stalin's stare, conveying how sincere I am. I know by leaving Callan, I have placed a bigger target on my head and dragged them into this mess with me. However, something tells me they know how to remove themselves from the equation—why else agree to help me if not?

“I believe you, but whether you want to walk this line or not, they're coming. Callan is involved. You cannot simply request the help of someone of his nature and then cut and run when things become difficult,” Stalin bites out through gritted teeth. His voice is soft, his tone angry. He looks over my shoulder, ensuring we are still alone. “Callan has compromised himself for you.” Stalin's voice is fierce.

“How is he?” I ask, stirring my teabag. I don't look up—don't allow myself to hear the response.

“Would it shock you if I told you he is at Skyn trying to fix your mess?” His knuckles whiten as he clenches his fists. Hearing where he is has my guts twisting into knots. I stop what I'm doing and turn to look at Stalin properly. His anger is vibrating around my house like a damn ping-pong ball.

“Honestly, no. My agent is releasing a statement ensuring my and Callan's meet is purely professional. I will go ahead with the party for Oscar to keep up appearances. That way, Callan is kept out of this.” Or, at the very least, it can be swept over as a mere coincidence, and the Russians will think little more of Callan and his henchmen.

“You're painfully naïve, Miss Reid.” His mocking tone makes my jaw grate. I possibly am, for as much as I have lived in the limelight, I am very much sheltered in some ways, and it shows to him and his friends. Nevertheless, I will try to smooth any fallout I can. Try to keep Callan out of the mess surrounding me.

“I didn't want this, any of this,” snapping, I slam my spoon down and thrust my hands on my hips, “I regret ever agreeing to anything with Callan,

and I'm sorry. I will never make it known of his involvement even if those sick bastards threaten me." I vow fiercely. "You may be loyal to him and not agree with my actions, but I'm just as loyal. If not more—I love him." My fist is in a tight ball, and I slam it down on the side. "Surely, allowing him to continue would have only caused more complications. It would have resulted in him being left to deal with the complete fallout. I could never expect that of him, of you even. This is my mess, my fight, and I won't let that man take the fall," I hiss through my teeth.

"You really do love him," Stalin states. Scoffing, I pick up my cup and look around to find him shaking his head at my stupidity. You and me both, I think. I've catapulted this situation from one extreme to another and landed us all in the shit.

"He's a stubborn bastard, and he won't let this lie, no matter what you say or do," Stalin advises me. He picks up a pair of sunglasses I hadn't noticed on the side and puts them on. "Take care, Zara," he mutters and walks down my hall, exiting through the front door. As soon as it clicks shut, Oscar comes back towards me, scowling.

"What the hell is going on?" he huffs and mutters, thoroughly put out that he isn't being involved in any of this.

"Honestly, Oscar, nothing. Things got a bit heated when I decided to leave Callan's. Stalin was just reminding me of my place."

"And that's it. What were you talking about? Your hall is a fucking mile long. I couldn't hear a damn thing," he whines and drops down into the chair nearest to him.

"You weren't supposed to. Look, things are just a bit tense and with me booking your party—" I eye him, and he smiles slowly. "I know you've seen the papers, not much of a surprise, huh?"

"So we can't have it there?" He looks disappointed.

"We can." I make him a drink and set them both down, taking the opposite seat, and sigh. "I've been a crap friend, and I want to make it up to you." I can't ignore the pinch of guilt at Callan being the one who suggested the party. I hadn't even considered it or Oscar at the time. "I still have a fair bit to do for it, so I'm going to head out and crack on after this drink," I tell him softly.

"I was pretty hurt when you got involved with Callan," he admits, and my gut drops to my bare toes, "and I know he orchestrated it all. It's typical

Callan.” His eyes roll, and his tone lowers. “But I never expected you to fall in love with him. The man is a barbarian.” He is wide-eyed and confused.

“Not with me.” My voice cracks and I swallow the thick ball of emotion clogging my throat. My phone pings, and I pick it up to find a message from the man himself. Even seeing Callan’s name on my screen causes my chest to ache.

Party arranged. Refreshments and entertainment included.

All you need to do is get people here.

August 12th @ 8pm.

Roof garden.

C

“See.” I twist my phone, showing Oscar that Callan has taken care of it, without so much as a thought in my direction.

“You look like you swallowed a live bee,” he grimaces.

I laugh and stare at the screen.

“Yeah, I do,” I admit. I decide to leave my drink, no longer in the mood for it. “I’m going to sort my face out, then arrange the invites.”

“Want me to do anything?” My friend offers.

I shake my head and peck his cheek.

“Just turn up.” I leave him downstairs whilst I go through a quicker version of my usual skincare routine, and as soon as I’m at the foot of the stairs, he is there, ready with his phone.

“Quick, let me snap a picture for your Instagram.” He lifts, we pose, and he snaps a shot of us looking back to being inseparable. “Off to plan a party,” he says to himself, tapping away on the screen.

“See you later.” I leave him at mine. My poor car has been sitting unused for the last two weeks, but she purrs to life as soon as I get in. I want to arrange E-invites for Oscar’s birthday, and the only person I know who can arrange that is Beth Bridges. I’ve used her services before, and I’m hoping she will help me out regardless of the timing. Callan has given me less than two weeks to prepare for this, but I have no doubt the place will be packed with everyone who is anyone in our social circle.

I dial her on my hands-free whilst I’m zipping between lanes and down busy streets, but she doesn’t answer.

“Hi Beth, it’s Zara. I’m hoping you can do me a huge favour. Can you call me back when you’re free? It’s kind of urgent. Thanks. Bye.” The call cuts and I manoeuvre through the streets until I can park up. I need to get Oscar a birthday gift, something personal. I decide to head to a jewellers I know. I’m stepping through the door when my phone goes. It’s Beth. “Hi, thanks for calling me back,” I say with a smile.

“Of course, everything okay?”

“That all depends if you can help me out. How are you?” I ask.

“Good, thanks, you?”

“Yes, thanks. I need a big favour if you're not too busy.”

“I’m pretty held up at the moment. What’s the problem?”

“Oscar’s birthday. I’ve left it really late, and I wondered if you could knock up some E-invites for me?” I say in a pleading tone.

“I’m about to meet a client. Any chance you can email me over specifics, and I will see what I can do?”

“Sure, thanks.” She is a star.

“When is it?” She wonders idly.

“August 12th.” I wince, moving around the room and looking at some watches and cufflinks.

“Wow, you weren’t lying when you said last minute,” she laughs harshly.

“I know, sorry. I’ve been so busy. It’s all just been a bit chaotic,” I murmur, eyeing the nearest cabinet with diamond rings.

“Send me an email, and I’ll come back to you tomorrow,” she says.

“Great, thank you.” I disconnect the call to see an assistant already floating nearby, eager to engage me in conversation. I welcome them because anything is better than my thoughts. Trays upon trays of watches all glint back at me. The assistant gushes out information about each watch—their brand and specifics, but I honestly have little idea what it all means. It tells the time and looks nice that’s all I care about. I’m sure Oscar would be listening eagerly, so I try for him, but soon choose a Breitling that I know he will love despite what it can or can’t do. With that done, I pay and decide to treat myself to a new outfit for Oscar’s party. I hit the street and blink at the flash of a camera a few metres away.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The photographer begins firing questions about Callan: how long have we been dating, how did we meet, will I give him an exclusive? I had intended to walk to a nearby boutique, but I walk to my car instead. He is pressing the camera in my face.

“Come on, Miss Reid, we’re all dying to find out about your new love?” he says aggressively. He is purposefully standing in front of my car. My heart hollows, but I keep my face passive.

I remain calm. In my mind, I have elbowed him out of the way and pushed my way to my car.

“Excuse me.” I smile politely. I know if I keep calm, professional, and kind, he will look bad in the eyes of the public.

“How did you and Mr Scott meet?” he demands, his foot stretched out to keep me from overstepping him.

“In his club after I contacted Nexo about hosting Oscar’s party,” I offer in the hope he will piss off. He doesn’t. It just fuels him further.

“So your relationship started from there?” He smirks.

“No, outside of our meeting, I do not know Mr Scott or intend to. Excuse me,” I say, once more keeping my face emotionless.

“Oh, come on, he was especially tactile with you.” He laughs, calling me out.

“In comparison with who, you?” I tilt my head as my naturally sarcastic nature slips free. “Mine and Mr Scott’s relationship is purely professional and *platonic*. Excuse me.” My tone never wavers. I keep it sweet, polite and hold his eyes to give the impression I’m being genuine. Given that I no longer have any involvement with Callan, it’s not hard to convey the truth of our situation.

“Miss Reid—”

“I really do need to leave. Please allow me to get into my car. I’ve asked you repeatedly.” I smile, pointing to my car, the camera rolling.

He begrudgingly steps out of the way.

“The truth will come out sooner or later,” he mutters.

“When it does, be a sweetie and update me.” I smile. “And if by any chance I see Mr Scott whilst attending Mr Winters’ party, I’ll be sure to ask him to give you a hug so you don’t feel so left out. Have a great day,” I say brightly, as I slip into the car. His face twists in annoyance, and he switches from film to photo, and flashes erupt against my eyes before I manage to pull away.

I’ll ask Gina to send me a few sample cocktail dresses instead. I’ve had enough of reality for today.



The next week seems to tumble away. Oscar is more than happy to have me back by his side and is acting like nothing has changed, when, unbeknownst to him, it has, so much so. I don't know what my future will hold, but I do know, either way, he won't be a part of it. I throw myself into our friendship, giving him the very best of myself, and he laps it up like a starved child. I pried enough out of him about Anita to find out she is no better and, if anything, worse. Oscar is losing grip of her, and she is just losing it. He admitted he hopes she becomes unwell enough to be admitted to hospital for help. She is a ticking time bomb, rattling around in a huge mansion, pissed as a newt, crying for a husband that will never come home. It's hopelessly sad, and I can see how difficult it is for my friend, so I focus on him, keeping a smile on his face.

We hit boutiques and bars, lunch out, and slob in. He floods my Instagram with our daily antics. Shoots, castings, and a spa afternoon that we both sorely needed. When I do have the time, I try to dig up any information about my father, but unless I come forward with my true identity, any information I do find is nothing more than what others on the internet have access to. My father's belongings and business were all dismantled and taken by the government. I was his only living family member, and I supposedly died with him. Without a clue as to why the Russians are still eager to kill me, I'm struggling to make sense of it all. The one person who can help me means too much to me to place in the line of fire.

It's only as I'm getting ready for Oscar's party that I acknowledge the trepidation drifting along my skin. Oscar's lips are buttoned shut. Not once have we discussed Callan.

“Gina has outdone herself with this dress,” Oscar says, lifting it up and looking at it. It's a short hem, glittery wrap-dress, sleeveless, and very fitted.

“I know. It's cute.” My voice strains as I try to apply my eye-liner. The invites were sent over to me the day after I contacted Beth. She had conjured up a matte black design with a light fine rose gold font and bold, shiny black writing for the location. They were masculine but fun, and Oscar had loved it. We fast-tracked them, sending them to all his contacts and more than expected responded. It's going to be a hell of a night.

“Are you going smokey?” he asks, hooking my dress back up.

“No, I think the dress is loud enough. I'm going to keep my face neutral,” I murmur, gliding mascara along my naturally thick lashes.

“Lips?”

“Neutral, maybe a mocha gloss.” Oscar pulls back. I know why. Everyone is so used to seeing me with red lips, but I fancy a change tonight and say as much to him.

“Knock yourself out. I think you will look fucking hot with a gloss.” He is ready to go. He has been for the past ten minutes, but I didn't want to smudge my eyes. I highlight my cheeks and add the gloss I ordered earlier this week. Oscar hands me my dress, and I slip it on. With the bronzed glitter and neutral makeup, I look young and carefree, a regular party girl, nothing like the red-lipped elegant model I feign to be daily.

Oscar wolf-whistles.

“I know you don't want to hear this, but that man is going to kick himself.” That man. It has my stomach clenching, and I throw a wane smile.

“It's not meant to be.” Callan and I would never have worked. “So I'm not letting it matter,” I declare confidently. I sound genuine. Inside, I'm shaken to the core and desperate for Callan to attend tonight. I'm petrified to see him and witness his indifference, yet being out of his company for this short time has left me feeling bereft. I want to lay my eyes upon him and feel the residue of calm he somehow offers me. I'm a mix of nauseous emotions, but tonight is about Oscar. He is looking suspiciously at me, but I ignore him and open my drawer on my dressing table.

“Right, before we head out, Happy Birthday.” I twist and hold the ribbon-tied box up high for him.

Gasping, he takes it and grins excitedly at me.

“You spoil me,” he smirks, untying it and lifting the lid to laugh out shock, “fucking hell, Z!” He throws himself at me and hugs me tight before

pulling back to look at his gift. “I love it! It’s sexy as fuck. You angel. Thank you.” He litters my head with kisses whilst I flinch at his endearment.

I force a smile onto my face.

“You’re welcome.” His excitement is infectious, and soon, we’re both grinning like a pair of fools. I latch onto his emotions—too afraid to deal with mine. I watch as he puts it on and lifts his wrist, staring happily at it. “I can’t wait to meet Chloe,” I say, clipping my own jewellery on and spraying myself.

“She’s nervous.” He laughs.

“She has no need to be,” I say. I hope she doesn’t think I’m a diva?

“I said that,” he mutters and checks his watch, “oh, look, it’s time to go.” He grins, and rolling my eyes, I collect up my clutch, and we depart, dolled up and ready to party. The ride to Nexo is quick and full of laughter. I don’t want my nerves to ruin Oscar’s birthday, but throughout the journey, I keep wondering if Callan will be there. It would make sense for him to be, yet how I will be when I see him is a whole other story. These feelings are all very new to me; new to feel, experience, and process. I thought running from danger was hard, that the modelling industry and the press were, they still are, a constant emotional and physical demand, but this feeling I have weighing me down is taxing, grim, and explicitly intolerable. How I will be able to face him and smile with anything akin to indifference is beyond me—it will take every ounce of reserve I have. I remind myself silently I was able to stand up and walk away from him, and that is a feat I didn’t think I was capable of. He was at his weakest, and that was exactly why I could do it, I remind myself glumly. He was unusually vulnerable. I, for once, had the upper hand, but here, tonight, I know Callan will be a formidable force.

“Holy shit!” Oscar exclaims as we pull up slowly. I stare out of the window, and not only is there a stream of people filing in, there are bouncers and press along with waiters just shy of the entrance handing out a free glass of fizz. Callan has really gone all out. I’m surprised because he can’t stand Oscar. Or is it just that this party is supposed to have been arranged by me that he has ensured everything is on point?

“Ready.” I grin, my mind whirling with those thoughts.

“Fuck, yes. I know you don’t drink, but can you maybe have one glass with me, just one?” He pouts. I did last year. It’s the only time I really allow

myself the one slip up, and one drink is more than enough. It usually lasts me the evening and makes me feel heady as hell.

“Sure.”

“There’s Chloe.” Oscar nods to the petite brunette making her way in with the throng of people. She’s queuing, and I feel bad for not suggesting she meet us at mine.

“Let’s go and save her,” I offer, following Oscar out to a chorus of hellos and flashes. He beelines for Chloe, and I’m hot on his heel.

“Chlo!” he shouts. Her nervous glance comes up, and her face relaxes slightly. I smile at her, and we head over, helping her out under the rope. Oscar swoops down and pecks her lips. “You look amazing.” He beams. I melt at them—how sweet. She really does look lovely; her cocktail dress is floaty and demure. Her hair curled to perfection, and makeup simple. With their heads of dark hair, they look gorgeous together.

“You look stunning!” I add. Oscar turns and pulls his girl to me.

“Chlo, this is Zara. Z, this is Chlo.” He looks ready to burst, and I feel so happy for him. Chloe seems unsure what to do, so I lean in and hug her tight.

“It’s so great to meet you!” I greet her warmly, feeling Oscar’s hand squeeze my arm gratefully.

“Hi, the queue was huge.” She laughs lightly, looking back at all the people Oscar is waving and grinning at. He loves the attention. Grabbing his phone, he pulls us in, capturing all the guests behind, and snaps a picture.

“Thank god we turned up when we did. Otherwise, we might not have seen you,” I tell her as we head inside. We all grab a flute of champagne as we enter. The foyer ceiling is thick with balloons, and an upbeat song is playing in the background. I give a little sashay as we head to the elevator, and once inside, we soar upwards, but rather than stopping on the level marked N, we go to level R. The doors swoosh open, and the upstairs bar is already a maze of people. The bank of windows is open, leading out to the roof garden, bringing air and the night sky indoors. Lights twinkle overhead, a champagne fountain stands centre to the room, and music plays floating out over London’s skyline. It looks incredible. If I do, by any chance, bump into King Callan, I will be sure to say a heartfelt thank you. As we move through the room, I lose Oscar and Chloe to his guests. I come across a server with canapes and see against the main wall adorned with the

word NEXO is a four-tier, black and cream cake. He really has thought of everything. I knew he would have it all under control and no doubt delegate some poor sod to rush about, but I really wasn't expecting this amount of effort.

I hope I don't need to make a speech to say thank you. Shit, I bet I do. I didn't even consider it, nor have I prepared anything. Hopefully, Oscar will do one, and I can avoid it. I'm circling the room when I clock Tony, standing ramrod-straight, face a mask of displeasure. I bet he didn't want to be here. His face tilts, and our eyes meet, and I give a brief and barely visible smile and take myself off to find Oscar. If Tony is here, the likelihood is that Callan will be here too. I find myself searching for him discreetly. If he isn't out on the floor, he will be watching from his office. Unlike on the lower level, his office doesn't have window access to the rooftop. I'm glad, as I'm finding it hard enough to not seek out any cameras, but avoiding looking into the bank of one-way glass would crucify me. After circling the bar and greeting various people, I happily deduce he isn't out here. My shoulders, that I didn't know were taut, soften, and I begin to relax a little. I finally find Oscar, hand-in-hand with Chloe outside. He is lapping up the attention and chatting with a group of people I don't personally know.

"Here she is! Zara. This place looks insane. Thank you," he gushes, pecking my cheek.

"I'm glad you love it." I can imagine within the next half hour, all the guests will have arrived. It's still early, so most are milling around, chatting and drinking.

"Did you see my fucking cake? Well, of course you did!" he chuckles. "Z, this is just the best and my present." He holds his arm up to the group, grinning like a fool. I sometimes forget how young he is, how young we both are. Chloe's eyes bug at his watch, and she chews on her lip, seeming distracted.

I slip beside her.

"I've never seen Oscar like this with a woman. You make him so happy." Her frown flips, and she smiles shyly at me, her eyes drifting back to the offending gift. "It's just a clock." I pull a face. "Honestly, Oscar loves the flare of this life, but he is pretty chilled out too," I reassure her.

She nods and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and lifts to talk into my ear.

“I booked us a weekend away, Paris. We fly out tomorrow,” she whispers excitedly.

“He will love that. Also, his passport’s at mine. I will have to get it to you,” I impart quickly when Oscar twists to get in on the conversation.

“What are you two concocting?” he muses, finishing the rest of his drink.

“Nothing,” we say in unison, and he laughs loudly, drawing a few glances. I’m glad Chloe is on the scene. If I do have to part ways with Oscar for whatever reason, at least he will have her. I frown at a few women close by who are again searching the open space.

“Where is he?” one says, and another shrugs. I suspect they mean Oscar, and I’m about to get their attention when another chimes in.

“I thought he’d be here. He owns the place,” she mutters, her hair scraped back; makeup thick, dress revealing. Unbelievable! They aren’t here for my friend’s birthday, but for Callan fucking Scott!

I want to march over and tell them the man in question doesn’t like stuck-up money grabbers, but I don’t know if that is true. Callan has always kept me at arm’s length. I’m angry on my friend’s behalf and insanely jealous. I have no doubt Callan has resumed his usual sexual activities. My mouth sours, and I have to force a strained smile. I can’t listen to them fawning over him, so I step away and take the first sip of my drink. I’m going to need it if half of London’s female elite are here to hook up with the best sex of my life.

Chapter Twenty-Four

As the hours tick by, I become even more on edge, worried any second the beast of a man will saunter in and send each woman into an excited frenzy. Each time the elevator doors whoosh open, my head involuntarily snaps round. I could slap myself. I'm no better than them.

Everybody is well on their way to being drunk, music is thumping, and the drinks are flowing like the fountain inside, sparkling wine mixes with diamonds and the glitter of dresses. I'm possibly the only person, other than the servers, who isn't under the influence. I do feel a little tipsy from my one glass, and without anything to eat to soak it up, I'm still a little fuzzy.

Oscar's loud and slightly slurred voice rings out across the open patio, and faces appear as people stand and move, gaining a better view as he steps up onto a table to gain some height. Tony gives me a disapproving headshake, but I shrug because I know I won't be able to get him down.

"Fellow alcoholics!" he begins, drawing a few chuckles, but most pull the typical political smile. "Firstly, I want to thank you all for coming. I know dragging yourselves out to celebrate with me must have been a hardship." That pulls a few more laughs out. "So far, I've had the best fucking night," he slips and nearly loses his footing, giving an unmanly yip, making us all laugh at his expense, "okay, okay, it's not news that I am rather pissed." He grins, then turns to me and goes solemn. "To you." He holds his glass high. "To my gorgeous friend, thank you for trying to surprise me with tonight, and fuck the press for ruining it," he huffs, and I give him a wink, "you truly are the best a person could wish for." I put my hand to my heart, and we share a smile together. It reflects all our love for one another. It's not merely about tonight. "I love you. I'm grateful to you, but I really wish you'd actually start drinking. It's your only downfall," he mutters playfully. That gains a few shocked glances my way as I shake my head no at him.

"Someone needs to keep an even head when you're on the loose!" I call back. I look at Chloe. "Plus, you've got another favourite to drink with. I

don't need to." I grin.

"Yes," he grins knowingly, "to my gorgeous girlfriend. You're sexy as hell, and I can't wait to whip off to Paris with you." Chloe is red—bless her. I don't think she is used to the attention. Oscar mentioned she is a small-time actress and recently moved to the area, so this must be pretty overwhelming for her. She blows him a kiss, and Oscar beckons me up. "Get up here and give me a hug!" he demands pensively. I go, moving through the crowd until I'm standing below him. He holds out his hand, and I throw Tony a quick look but put my hand in his to be pulled up onto the table, clutching my dress to keep my dignity intact. As soon as we are eye level, he smiles at me. "Honestly, thank you," he says sincerely.

"Oscar, you're as good as family. I think you forget that sometimes." And yet, I can't tell him the truth of my past or what really happened between Callan and me. I sometimes wonder why that is. If some intrinsic part of me refuses to share my former years because it knows Oscar could never cope with that reality.

He pulls me tight and hugs me close to his side, and I'm eternally grateful because Callan chooses that moment to walk out of the elevator. There is a strange hush that echoes through the bar but is quickly picked back up when Oscar says, "And, of course, a big thank you to Mr Scott for allowing us to use this space for my birthday." Oscar's voice sounds strained, and I feel the tension in him now that Callan has arrived. Callan's black eyes nearly match the darkened sky, and they are trained on me. He inclines his head but says little else. I never really expected him to attend at all. Surely, if he needed to work, he could have come in unseen. His office is a level down. As expected, women all pump out their chests and offer their best sides for him. He has one destination, one person on his mind. Me. He walks with purpose, smiling politely, if not a little stale to those around us. With us standing on one of the lower couch tables, even with my heels, he finally hits eye level. He lifts his hand, and I throw on a fixed smile whilst he helps me down. There are people nearby, so I worry about what he will say.

"Everything going smoothly? I've been informed there have been no mishaps." His voice, deep and gravelly, makes my toes curl in my shoes.

"It's all been perfect. Just what Oscar likes. Thank you for all this." I try to act neutrally. Unaffected, professional, but his fingers dance down my

spine, and he keeps his head angled. He reaches into his jacket as though going for his phone but says into my ear.

“You’re not off the hook, angel.” His hostile tone rankles me. I’m about to tell him we are both done when he adds quickly, quietly, “Russians are making noise.” I think I may prefer the noise, the not knowing, as the silence from them has given me no peace all these years. At least this way, I may finally know what it is that they want.

I twist to face him, putting a little distance between us, whilst throwing the brightest smile on my face, and I shake his hand.

“Again, Mr Scott, thank you for all you’ve done.” He looks momentarily shocked by my nonchalance. Pulling my hand free, I turn and walk away, aware of the eyes on me: the guests, his. That one touch has sent a crackle of electricity travelling through my limbs. I don't want to be photographed with him again or give people the impression we were, or are, more than just business. That one encounter has left my breath choppy, and I find myself pulling a flute of champagne from a passing waiter, but soon replace it on another passing tray, exasperated with myself. I’m ready to go home. I know this party will roll on for hours, but it’s not my scene, never has been. I’m in two minds to make my excuses and kiss Oscar goodbye, but a drunken Chloe appears in front of me and takes my hand.

“Come and dance!” She blinks pleadingly at me. I decide to indulge her and Oscar, who is moving freely about the inside bar. The party is in full swing, people are up dancing, swaying, kissing, and all I can think is less than four metres away is a man who has ensnared my whole soul, who is being fawned over by a large hoard of women, and like me, he has chosen to stay and indulge. Well, bugger him and his sexy tattooed body if he thinks he can make me jealous by wrapping women up in conversation. I watch in silent horror as he disarms them with a full wattage Callan Scott panty-wetting smile. Damn him, just fucking damn him. I allow Chloe to pull me into the throng, where I begin to dance. Not for fun, but to send Callan into a sweat-induced jealous feud. Two can play that game.

I sway and roll my hips. I even go as far as occasionally running my fingers through the ends of my hair to draw attention to my face. When a male hand lands on my hip, I don’t shrug it off. I move and dance to both beats, the music and him, my mystery partner. He’s a good dancer, light and rhythmic. Rocking my hips, I venture a look at Callan and catch sight of him standing abruptly, his face a dark mask of rage. I jolt, shaken by his

open dislike of me dancing with a man. Is he going to drag me away? He stalks off back to the elevator, and shame washes over me. How childish can I be? I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing here. None. I'm an irrevocable mess. No wonder he left. He is more than likely disgusted with me. He was being nothing more than a businessman and a professional. The same hand squeezes my hip, and I shrug him off.

"Sorry, I actually have a headache." Frowning, I look back and see an attractive older man, tall, lean, salt and pepper hair, and a twinkle in his eyes. I give him an apologetic smile.

"It is rather loud in here. Would you like some fresh air?" His offer does nothing for me. I don't want to converse with this man or anyone else.

"I think I'm going to head home, actually," I reply, stepping away and going in search of Oscar and Chloe. I find them smooching in a corner.

"I hate to break the celebration up," I chuckle. Oscar grins and prides himself away from Chloe's lips.

"What's up?" he asks, already deducing I'm not okay.

"I think I have a migraine coming on," I fib. I do feel terrible, pathetic, and a regular fake. I just want to pull on my pyjamas and hide away.

Oscar pulls me in for a hug. "Oh, honey. You don't look great. I can imagine this hasn't been easy," he murmurs in my ear, "thanks for coming and for all of this. Get home." Why is he so sympathetic? It only adds to my self-hatred.

I aim to keep a smile on my face, but it's strained in place, awkward, and unnatural.

"Sorry, Oscar, as soon as you come back from Paris, we can all catch up," I offer apologetically, tucking my hair back and sighing roughly.

"Sure! We'd love that," he says to both Chloe and me, and his girlfriend nods her agreement. Why do they both have to be so understanding?

"We can get lunch?" she adds, hooking her arm through his. "I hope you feel better soon. You look really pale." She grimaces at my face. I tentatively place my hand on my stomach. I do feel rotten.

"Have a great evening. I'll text you guys in a bit. Night." I peck both their cheeks and make my leave, hitting the elevator and crossing the foyer quickly. My heels clack, my breath rushes out loudly, and the second I hit the pavement, I'm battered by flashbulbs. Fuck!

As quickly as I can, I hail a taxi and manage to get in with little fuss. The press tries to follow, some rushing to their vehicles, others hanging around

by the main entrance for other guests. Uttering my address, I sit back for the ride. If the press catches up, there is little I can do. I just don't want them camped outside my home. Usually, I would ask that the driver loop around or double back, anything to throw them off, but now I know that the Russians are coming, it's only a matter of time. I've been naïve to think that all this time they didn't know my whereabouts. They have probably had someone watch me all these years, someone I'd never expect. Someone I say hello to regularly and think nothing of it. I glower at my reflection in the taxi window, my posture stiff and cold. I'm spiralling out of control into this loathsome being. Willing myself to detest every extremity of my life, I give myself permission for my inner parts to hate it all so that when death comes, no matter how vulgar, I will welcome it, egg it on, and cherish the moment. Darkness appears as an invisible being, wrapping its arm around my shoulder, feigning friendship. I welcome that in, too—bring the darkness to my doorstep—let it feast. I don't want to feel anymore. Death can have me. The Russians can have me. Seeing Callan again has only served as an agonising reminder that I could never have him in this life or the next, so why live it at all. Living has only served as a hardship to me. At least in death, there will be peace.



Do I expect Callan to be at mine when I let myself in? Of course I do. It's even more painful when I come to the jarring realisation that he's not. He's done with me, that's for sure. What I thought was him giving me a little reminder of our month not yet being up was just him warning me the Russians were close to making their move. Silly me. I honestly thought, deep down in that minuscule part of me that has held onto the hope of a normal life, that he would be the man to fight for me. To slay my dragons, to scream at me that I was worth it, and he'd go down fighting to prove to me I was worth more than this false existence. I trudge upstairs with a cup of tea and run myself a bath. It's hot and bubbly and exactly what I need to calm my fizzing emotions. It's a few moments before the first tear slips free, then another before I can talk myself out of it. I'm sobbing, loud, shoulder-shaking sobs. Nothing stops them, not even when I dunk under the water to shock myself into shape. I take my tears to bed and sob into the sheets.

Zara Reid, London's top model. I scoff at the thought. They'd laugh if they could see me now: laugh and lose interest. My life is anything but the perfect picture I portray. Times like this, I want to take a photo, run a video, and show them I'm a fraud with a dirty secret weighing me down. I tumble into a fitful and nightmare-fuelled sleep.

Chapter Twenty- Five

I've been numb for days. I'm not entirely sure how I am functioning. I can't recall arriving to any shoots and meetings. Occasionally, I blink, and I'm in a room full of people staring at me, waiting for an answer. I don't have an answer anymore. I no longer care about the concern on Miranda's face. I'm in half a mind to reach out to the Russians and hand myself over to them, but I know, hidden in the deepest and darkest part of me, I'm scared to die. The only choice I've consciously made is to stay within the confines of my home.

Tonight, the power is out, and my fragile mind can't help wondering if there is a more sinister cause. Everywhere is being fuelled by candles, and despite the tiny flicker of light everywhere, it's still dark as night in some places. Every now and then, the electricity buzzes, allowing me some proper light. I try to keep busy on my laptop, checking some photographs from shoots. Today's date marks the end of what would have been my full month with Callan. Tonight would have been our last night—the evening our deal would end. Yet here I am home alone, not a man in sight, and awaiting the Russians' revenge.

A creak in the hall makes me jump. I stiffen and close the lid of my laptop, blowing out the nearest few candles, sitting in silence, listening out for another sound. After a few moments, I deduce it's nothing. For heaven's sake, Zara, you're overreacting. There is absolutely nothing to be afraid of. Another creak tears through the quiet, and my breathing drops to a shallow pant.

They're here.

Dread drenches me, and my eyes fill up. I tiptoe towards the door and flatten my back, grabbing a heavy candlestick to defend myself with. I don't want to draw attention to my whereabouts, and if I knock them out, I can run out of the front door. I don't want Oscar's birthday to be the last time I see the man I love. I'm watching the black gap between the doorway and hear the soft rush of breath. My whole body is shaking, and my heart is

screaming at me to run. A shadow falls between the open space and blackens the room, so when a figure steps in, I swing with a scream. A quick arm deflects, but it still makes contact, and I hear a resounding crack. Yes!

“Fuck!” Callan roars.

“Oh, god, Callan!” I cry, dropping the weapon with a clang and rush to him as he staggers to the side. He must have dropped into a chair because it groans under his weight.

“Shit, Zara,” he huffs irritably.

“I’m sorry. I was scared.” The lights flicker on momentarily, like they have done on and off for most of the evening, and I find Callan with blood trickling down his face. “You’re bleeding. I’m so, so sorry, I thought... it’s just that, the Russians.” I sniff. I’m tugged forward so I fall into his lap. My hands cup his face, and I can feel the sticky liquid against my palm. He smells of alcohol. I pull back a little. “Have you been drinking?” My head becomes caged in his big hands, and he hums out a reply. “You need a hospital,” I say. Why is he so beautiful? My eyes brim with hot tears. I want to sink into him and vanish.

The lights flicker, and I lose sight of him.

“I need you. The past few weeks have been fucking horrible. We made a deal. I wasn’t done yet,” he tells me in a soft slur.

“Callan, I can’t do this,” I whisper, a croak of emotion audible in my voice. He only wants me because he is drunk.

“You can. Kiss me, Zara.” I can feel the weight of his stare on me, and my heart clenches and caves.

As if the electrician is now on board, the lights flicker and stay on. I get a true glimpse at his cut. It’s deep, but it’s only a small nick. I think it might need a stitch or two.

“You’re cut and drunk.” I shake my head in his large grasp, reaching to touch the gash, but he brings his mouth to mine, and my body melts. Desire explodes from my lips outwards, sending my heart to ache and pump wildly. His lips are everything I imagined, soft and hard, teasing and passionate. He is perfect in every way I need, and it kills me, but I try to pull back. I don’t want him to regret this. “Callan, you’re drunk.”

“Only because I couldn’t cope with not having you.” His lips press back to mine, and he groans deeply, sending a vibration through his big chest. “Your mouth is sinful.” He grins, amused by his own enjoyment in kissing.

“Callan, stop. You’re drunk.” I sigh regretfully.

“So I gave in and had a drink.” His big shoulder lifts clumsily. “You’re guilty of it,” he admonishes. I snap back, perplexed. What, when? “The club,” he mutters when I frown at him. It was one drink! Shit, has he only had one drink? How is he this affected? I could laugh at the big fool. “And I’m tipsy, not drunk,” he scoffs, frowning at me and trying to touch his weeping cut.

“How much did you have to drink?” I reprimand, flicking his curious hand away.

“A couple of whiskeys,” he states as though it’s nothing. I hope he didn’t drive here!

“Uh huh.” I’m smothering a smile.

“Uh huh,” he mimics. “Kiss me. All this time, you’ve wanted my mouth, and now you’re not even going to let me taste you. I love your lips,” he says with a goofy smirk. “You’re stunning. Do you know that?” His smile is light, his eyes heavy with need. “Come on, angel, put me out of my misery. I want your tongue on mine. I’ve thought of nothing else since you turned up at Skyn.” He has?

“I—”

His mouth slams to mine, and I’m suddenly feverishly kissing him. His tongue sweeps in, and I’m pulling at his top. Oh, God. Hell. His mouth is incredible.

"Fucking hell," he pants. His lips keep on pecking and nipping, his tongue driving in before he holds me still and kisses me like a madman. “I’m so pissed at you for running,” he growls, “I’ve barely lasted two weeks. I want you, Zara. I can’t get you out of my head.” We’re fumbling with our clothes. Once we’ve removed enough to allow access, he’s thrusting up to grind against my flesh, and he tugs on my lip with his teeth.

“I’ve never kissed a woman before,” he groans. I’m shocked and honoured. I knew he had his no kissing rule, but I never suspected that confession. I assumed he’d been intimate before, but something had made him close himself off.

Knowing I’m the only woman to have his lips sends me crazy with desire. I grind myself on him roughly.

“Callan, now,” I pant.

Forcing entry, he slips in, and we both shout out. My mouth charges back for another kiss. I knew he’d be a sensational kisser. He’s thick inside

me, and I flutter and clamp around him.

“Why?” I ask, panting. Do I care? Yes, yes, I bloody do. My lips are back on his, and our teeth are clashing. I’m greedy with need, helpless with pleasure. I want him fiercely. I grind down, crying out as his mouth devours me.

“Fuck, slow down.” I don’t. I bounce and grind my hips where he is buried deep, moaning sweetly.

Callan is up and slipping out of me. He drops me softly on the chair.

“Shit, Zara, wait. I didn’t come here to fuck you. I mean, I did, but not like this.” He laughs, holding his hands up to halt me.

I’m panting, my shirt is ripped, and he pulls me by the back of my neck and kisses me lazily, standing so we are toe-to-toe, clothes askew, and half-naked. “I was saving myself for the right woman,” he tells me in answer to my earlier question. “You going to be her? Because I don’t think I can let you walk away again.” His declaration has my soul weeping with innate happiness.

“I’m scared.” He is intuitive enough to read between the lines. I don’t mean that I’m scared of him. I’m sure as hell about him. He gives me drive, safety. I know he is danger, but he’s my danger. Him turning up here was everything I wanted, everything I needed to pick myself back up. Losing him even after this short time, it ruined me, broke something.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you, ever.” I nod as a stray tear finds its way down my cheek. I’ve missed this so much, him. Our connection. “You’re coming home with me,” he says, his thumb moving to wipe my cheek dry.

I nod. Yes, absolutely. I wouldn’t go anywhere else. I want to tell him how much I love him, how he has given me a sense of purpose and true hope. But I don’t. Something tells me the L-word isn’t something Callan is used to hearing or saying.

“Your head. It needs stitches.” I run my finger around the circumference of the small but deep gash I’ve inflicted on him.

“Nothing you haven’t dealt with before.” He grins. The blood has slowed, but it has left a smudged mess on his cheek.

“I am absolutely not doing that again. That’s the reason I fled,” I confess dramatically, holding my hands up and refusing to help. “How are you?” I ask, looking at his healing stomach.

“Fine, go and grab me a damp cloth, and you can get us back to mine. Stalin will deal with your dirty work.” He pokes playfully.

“You snuck in!” I accuse, frowning at him.

“It was dark, and I’m fucking pissed, angel. What did you expect, me to come dancing and singing ‘when the saints come marching fucking in?’” he spits, overdramatically. I laugh at the crazy image he has drawn in my mind.

“No, you fool. Don't ever do that. It would scar me for life.” I chuckle and straighten myself out. I eye his erection prodding to the sky like a sword. “Let me grab a cloth and perhaps,” I point at his cock, “zip that away.” My tone suggests if he doesn't, I won't be held accountable for my actions. I begrudgingly watch as he folds it away. Pouting, I wander off in search of a compress, and he follows until we are both in the kitchen and I'm dampening a clean hand towel. I hand it over, and he presses it to his wound.

“Go and grab some of your bits.” With a small excited nod, I practically skip off and fly around the place, packing a bag.

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A little while later, we're back at Callan's, and his cut is stitched perfectly, thanks to an awkward-looking Stalin who soon left us alone after tidying Callan's cut up. We're curled up on the sofa after I made us both a quick tea.

“I have questions,” I murmur, my face transfixed by the flames from the fire.

“I thought as much. What do you want to know?” Callan shifts, getting comfier. He adjusts his legs to allow me more room. I relax back, happy to be cocooned by his big frame.

“Your rules?” I ask simply. There are a few, but he knows I mean them all.

He doesn't leave me guessing, doesn't let me stew. He gives me the words I have wanted to hear for some time.

“I didn't want complications, so that's why I picked nameless women with no affiliation to me or my clubs. They never knew who I was, so they could never track me down.” Not until he stamped his face over countless papers for me, and I threw it back in his face.

“You used a false name?” I state, and he nods against my shoulder. Well, now they all know the truth.

“Always a different name,” he says. I wonder how many women have spent a night with this man, each remembering his face and his sexual brutality, but knowing him as someone else, Sam or Chad, Michael or Chris. They’d be searching for a false name, a fake person, and I was gifted the real one.

“The floor rule?” This one seemed so simple, but I know Callan enough to know this runs deeper than it being a gentlemen’s club.

He shrugs and laughs lightly to himself. “It started as a rule to protect the women, but the longer it went on, the more I realised whether they were safe or not, I didn’t want them on my club floor or around me. I was protecting me.”

I nod. He was keeping them at arm’s length. Keeping everyone at arm’s length until he was ready to allow someone in, someone worthy.

“You wanted an equal,” I whisper, looking at him, and he smiles. I can see the orange glow flicker and roll in his nighttime eyes.

Those eyes flare, and he swallows.

“I grew up in a brothel, Zara,” he admits solemnly. My lips part, shocked, realisation dawning at his apparent indifference to his trade and lifestyle. I nod, encouraging him to carry on. “My mother was a whore, and my sister and I were surrounded by the filth in this world. In this industry, everyone has a game plan, a ploy, a gimmick. The floor rule was my game plan, and it was a way to protect myself. By the time it was being implemented, I just knew whoever I let walk the same path as me would be the only woman to have my heart. I took it quite literally.” He smiles softly. “I don’t just want an equal. I want something greater than myself. I want the world and then some.”

“So you stopped any woman from entering your club and made sure they all stuck to their zones inside and outside?” I twist back to stare at the dazzling flames.

“That was the idea. I’ve had to fire a few women, but for the most part, they know I’m not approachable—that I’m off limits,” he rumbles.

I brace myself not for my own words, but those that will follow. His.

“And me?” I really want this to be it, the end to my disaster of a life. If I have to hide up in his penthouse or by entering through the back door of his clubs, then so be it. I will have him. I couldn’t wish or ask for more. I’d escape this light to share in his darkness.

“You.” His big chest expands as he mulls over the words, inviting the emotions in and wallowing in them. “You, my girl, are everything I never expected and exactly what I fucking wished for.” Scooping me up, he positions me facing him and threads big hands into my hair. His confession is sobering and unequivocally the best moment of my life. “You’re the love of my life.” My heart soars, and my eyes dampen.

I bite my lip and stare at his sincere eyes.

“I really thought I had lost you. I was so scared something would happen to you. I love you so much, and I couldn't be the reason you were hurt again,” I admit in a whisper. “Do you forgive me?”

“How about I show you how much I forgive you?” I sniff, nod, and let him carry me through the quiet penthouse to his master room. Nothing has changed. It’s still very much a male domain, and I love that, love the dark rich colours and elegance of his tastes. The room has always been pure seduction, and with him in it, I have no chance—he is temptation incarnate. No sooner are we over the threshold, I lower my mouth and adore his. I’ve wanted his lips and his tongue for so long that I can’t help but attach myself to them.

All evening, throughout our meal, on the way up to the penthouse, even when Stalin was knitting his cut together, I made a play for his mouth, pecking his lips as frequently as possible. He’d laugh, growl, and drag me back for a deeper kiss, and I loved it, love it now when he sweeps his tongue in and lowers us both down on the wide mattress. His hands, just like his lips, are slow and hypnotic as they remove my clothes and glide across goosebumped skin to my breasts, just as slow and passionate as they explore every inch of skin like he has never touched me before. My hands reciprocate, smoothing over wide muscles and patterned skin, dancing across his taut flesh and tightening when he sends me into a frenzy as he teases me endlessly. His mouth, hands and eyes are everywhere until I’m crumbling, shaking, and crying out in pleasure. Only then does he move his heavy body between my thighs.

“Callan, please,” I whimper, pulling his mouth down for a deep kiss. “I need you.” I don't just want him. I physically need him. He’s my lifeline.

“I know, angel, you’re so fucking beautiful, stunning.” He smiles softly, drags his mouth up my throat and sweeps his tongue in as he enters me in one deep, swift thrust. He fills me, a profound fullness filling me from limb to limb, calming my soul and bringing me back to life with our connection.

“You floor me. Do you know how hard it was for me to fight this?” Thrust. “To deny us both something I knew was so right?” Thrust. “I was aching for you,” he growls. Each thrust is deep, slow. He penetrates my mind with his loving words.

“I wanted you to give in.” I moan, wrapping my legs around his taut arse and letting him sink in and out at the most leisurely pace. It is nothing like our previous sessions. Each time was frantic and rough with need—this is all emotion. Love. He is making love to me, and I never thought I would experience that, let alone share in it. My eyes well up, and he shifts, moving my hands and knotting our fingers together above my head.

“Zara, I’ve got you.” He pumps in, swirls and pumps back deep. “It’s okay. I never thought I would have this either.” His head drops, his mouth finds mine, and I scrunch my eyes tight. He’s here with me: mind, body and soul, sharing in my thoughts, my dreams, and I could weep. I do weep. Weep with pleasure as he continues his slow assault until we are both groaning and kissing our way through our orgasm. I grip his hair and hold him to me as my body spasms over and over.

“I love you,” I pant. “I love you.” I’m breathless, drenched in sweat, and blissfully happy.

“I love you too, angel.” He pecks my nose and rolls us, pulling me on his chest. Sated, we both drift off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I wake sore, but last night was everything a woman could wish for. Callan has been so attentive with me, loving and sweet—a little rough, but, on the whole, a complete gentleman. We lay chatting for hours about our pasts. I finally feel ready to fight the Russians. I don't welcome them anymore. I pity them. They have no idea the kind of man they are up against. Callan repeatedly promised that I could trust him. That he loved me. He's made me feel worthy.

I nip to the bathroom and then root through both our things until I find some of my underwear, jeans, and one of his hoodies. I've never seen him wear it, so he must use it to workout in. I pull it all on and go in search of my man. Mine. I'm giddy, loved up, and excited for my future for the first time ever. He is usually holed up in his office, but I hear him and Stalin before I see them.

"Did you ask her?" Stalin says quietly.

"No, it's not really the kind of thing you just come out with." My steps slow, and I lift to my toes and stand quietly in the hallway.

"What the fuck have you been doing all this time." He scoffs. Callan doesn't answer, but Stalin adds, "I get you want to get your dick wet, but surely this is more important," he spits.

"Of course it is. She opened up about her past but never mentioned a file," Callan mutters irritably.

"Well, our intelligence remains confident that the Russians want this file. I have reason to believe she doesn't even know she has it, but it's why they have kept her alive all this time. She's blind to the power she has to take them down. If anything, she is aiding them and doesn't even realise it." What the fuck!

"You're right. It's what I have thought too," Callan responds thoughtfully. "I need to tread carefully, Stalin. I can't just make demands. Zara's fragile at the moment."

“The Russians are closing in. We don’t have time for this. Isabella doesn’t have time for this. *She* is fragile. Isabella is not fucking Zara.” Stalin growls out my name as though I’m a hindrance. A spoilt brat.

“Don’t assume I don’t know that,” Callan spits in a menacing tone. “Isabella is *everything* to me. This whole thing has been about Isabella and getting Isabella back. You know how much I love her. She is my fucking world, nothing, and no one will ever mean more to me than getting her back.” He sighs heavily. “But, Zara... I need to be careful. One wrong move, and she will flee.” I flinch and drop my head. Shame fills me. My gut aches with a bone churning fury as I try to hold in my tears. I want to scream at the pain filling me. He told me he loved me to win my trust back. Me leaving really fucked with his plans.

“She must have some of her father’s old things. That file is somewhere,” Stalin grinds out.

“We’ve turned her house over more than once. It isn’t there,” Callan mutters, irritated. So that’s why he was always in my house. It never looked out of place. He is a master of his art. I’m sick to my stomach. A fool. This was never about me—it was about Isabella. I twist on my foot and rush back to his room, gathering up my phone and a pair of trainers. The rest he can burn. I slip on my shoes and head back down the hall. I honestly hate him in this instant. I’ve never felt so used and interchangeable in all my life. I’m shaking, my body overcome with emotion, but what worries me is how violent I feel. I want to tear this place apart and rid him of the world. My rage is tangible.

“We need it. What if it’s the key to Isabella?” They’re talking about the file, the file I have no idea about, a file that has both kept me alive, and the Russians apparently safe from exposure.

“Stalin, I fucking know. Every minute I give Zara is another I’m taking from Isabella, and it fucking kills me, but I need to be clever.” I walk with purpose down the hall, quiet and quick, and as soon as I come into view, I go into a sprint. Both men’s heads come up in surprise. They look at each other, equally disturbed I have overheard them.

“ZARA!” Callan hollers, but I’m already in the elevator, the doors whooshing shut as his panicked face fills the gap.

“Go to hell, you piece of shit!” I scream. It’s the longest ride ever, and I anticipate either one or both men to be waiting at the bottom for me, but it’s empty. I race out into the car park and run as fast as I can out into central

London. It's a hive of activity, and I stick my hand out for a taxi, jumping in as I hear the tail end of Callan's voice calling for me from back inside the underground car park. The door shuts, and I sink down into the seat, pulling my phone to my ear. I don't need Oscar right now. I just want him, but his phone rings and rings. On a short yell, I disconnect the call and drop my head into my hands.

After a brief few strained moments, the driver says gruffly, "Where to?"

"Just keep driving around," I say quietly.

"Sure thing. Music?"

I shrug. I couldn't care less if he picked up a burlesque dancer to keep me occupied. My thoughts are racing, and my phone is going mad. I lift it, wanting Oscar's name to appear, but it's his: Callan's. I reject the call and try Oscar again. I'm angered that he doesn't answer—he always answers.

Callan's name flashes up once more. I reject it, and I'm almost ready to throw it out the moving vehicle when Oscar's name comes up.

"Oh, thank god, I need to see you."

"Oh. Sure, yeah." His voice sounds off, and I pull back and frown at the screen.

"Has Callan been in contact? Don't tell him I've called you," I sniff.

"No, I won't, he hasn't," he assures, clearing his throat.

"Can I see you?" I'm crying openly now. "Where are you?" I sniff.

It's a beat before he answers, and he sounds resigned. "At Chloe's, you have her address, right?"

"Yes, see you soon." I hang up and snuffle, avoiding the driver's eye when I give Chloe's address. We're driving for a good twenty minutes before the driver sidles up to the kerb, and I use my phone to pay.

"Thanks," I throw carelessly over my shoulder as I exit, slamming the door shut as I jog towards Chloe's place. The curtains are drawn. I know they only just got back from another few days away, but it's mid-morning. Checking over my shoulder for Callan, I'm relieved to find he isn't anywhere. I take the steps in a quick jog and knock on the door. I'm waiting a while and, in my emotional impatience, decide to knock again when I finally hear footsteps on the other side. The door opens slowly, and I'm looking down a dimly lit hall. Oscar's hand is on the door, so I step in.

"Sorry to just come round like this, but—"

The door shuts on a loud bang, and I scream. Oscar's eyes are red-rimmed. His face is a picture of guilt and fear because behind him, right

behind him, is my worst nightmare. The man from my every waking thought, every sleep-deprived night, every rip-curling scream I've jerked awake to.

I try to grab the door, but he yanks at my hair and kicks Oscar, who is sobbing as he says over and over, "I'm sorry." An angular grim face grins down at me, teeth: ugly and smoke-stained. Oh god, oh god!

"We've been expecting you, Olivia." He laughs with another man, a man I also recognise from my younger years. They're both here for me, both grinning manically at my presence. They grab Oscar and me, hauling us down the hallway. I'm kicking and screaming, my lungs eradicating all my hate and fear in despicable screeches. My hand swings out to connect with flesh, and when it does, I feel elation skit through my body. I dig my nails in and scratch. I hope it hurts like hell!

"Fucking bitch whore. I kill your father. I kill you too, bitch whore!" he snarls in my face. I've drawn red nail marks drawn on his cheek, and his breath repels me. I grimace, turning away briefly, but find myself stunned into shock when I see Chloe tied to a chair, gagged and crying silently. She is begging me with her eyes for something, anything: silence, compliance, help. She is shaking, and her hair is matted to her damp cheeks. Oscar is dragged back to an empty chair, where they begin to tie him back down, too.

"I'm sorry, Z. I am, but they—" A man cracks him on the side of the head with a gun, and he grunts, dropping forward. I flinch at the sound. It's deafening. I'm queasy. The crunch is loud. Blood pools and runs down his face and begins to drip on the floor.

"No more talking, pretty boy. The bitch is here now." He sighs happily. "Yes, the bitch is heeere," he croons.

I'm trembling. I can't even focus on my friend or his girlfriend. He sold me out. Let me come here knowing this awaited me. My oldest friend just threw me to the wolves like a lump of worn meat. The tallest man saunters towards me.

"Little Olivia Monroe. What a beautiful woman you have grown into. Some would even go as far to say priceless." He wiggles his dirty, knowing brows. I understand the undertones of his words, the foulness that surrounds him, what he does to people, women. He plans to sell me.

I spit in his face.

“Fuck you!” I scream and kick out, clipping his cheek as the guy behind takes my weight. A wide fist slams into my jaw, and I sink forward. Pain lances through my face, and the nerves in my head protest. Groaning, I force my head up. If I’m going to die, I will go down fighting, just like my father. Tears well up, not because of these men, but because all I can see is my father’s face as he took his own life to save mine. Just like I would do, I realise. Even though Oscar gave me up, I would never do that. I could never feed someone to the wolves to save my own skin. I’m better than that.

“Kill me!” I shout at him, egging him on, but he merely laughs, a sickening laugh: musical and evil.

“No. No. No. We have plans for you, Olivia, or do you prefer Zara?” He tilts his head, and the man behind tightens his grip on my arms, keeping me still. He looks back at Oscar, who is looking seriously perplexed.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the guy says, his Russian accent deep and cruel, “have you two met?” He points his gun filled hand between us. “No?”

He kicks another chair out and uses his foot to drag it to him so he can sit.

“Well.” He looks over his shoulder at my friend. “Oscar Winters,” he looks at me and grins darkly, “this is Olivia Monroe.” He points his gun directly at me. Oscar frowns at me. “Ah, she even had you fooled. You are a very good liar, Miss Monroe, and you have something of mine.”

Oscar frowns at me, but I don't confirm my true identity. Oscar will believe this is something to do with Callan. I'd rather he not learn the real truth. It could endanger his life.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I have nothing you could possibly want, and I’d never give it to you anyway!” I scathe, shaking the guy off, but he holds fast, digging his fingers in deep enough to bruise.

“Ah, because I shot your father? Terrible shame, but he made a mistake,” chair guy says to me, lifting his hand, using his thumbnail to pick at his teeth.

“So did you,” I spit. I fucking hope Callan is on his way or tracing my phone. Anything. Because I know I won't make it through to the next day without his help. I was never prepared for this, never wanted to prepare. Refusal to act meant it wasn't really true, and I was keen to stay in that bracket of denial.

He tsks at me, staring at his gun and stroking it—toying with me.

“I do not agree. You mean Mr Scott? Nothing we can’t handle.” He scoffs out a laugh to his friend at my back. “But your father, he had too easy a death. I did want to torture him, slowly, take off his fingers, and remove his tongue.” He eyes me darkly, and Chloe whimpers in the background. “I like to get dirty. It’s Ramis who likes to play with what’s left.” He lifts his chin to the man behind me. “Just like after we have finished with you, Olivia, Ramis wants to play. You escaped him all those years ago,” he tsks again. “Silly girl,” he muses, rolling his neck.

Ramis leans in, and his tongue runs up my cheek. I yank away and whip my head back to hit bone, but he anticipates it, shifts, and laughs.

“Still feisty, I see. Good.” He grabs my face and bites into my cheek, moaning.

My eyes go wide, my cheek stinging with pain.

“Get off!” I scream, wriggling and lashing out. With a quick move, he slaps me forcefully and I fall back. What pain was already throbbing in my face, doubles.

It’s Santino who crouches down to level up with me.

“We’ve had a buyer for you for years. He’s waited a long time to sample you. Hundreds of thousands he offered to have you for only three months.” He grins wickedly. My eyes widen in horror. “Of course he will give you back afterwards.” His eyes dance to Oscar, who is getting paler by the minute.

Ramis drops down too. “Back to us. Such a treat, aren’t you lucky?” he whispers. I swallow the sickness threatening to leave my stomach at the image being painted. I hang my head and breathe through my nose as Santino stands fluidly, his partner following suit.

“But first, you have our file, and we need it, so,” he hums, “unless you give us the file, we will cut off her fingers one by one until you give us what we need,” he says in a singsong voice. Chloe begins to cry uncontrollably, and Oscar is begging me to give them what I have. But I have nothing. I have no file. No evidence of their wrongdoings. No information they need.

“I don't know what they are talking about!” I scream at Oscar, furious at his betrayal. I do not know these men or what my father was really involved in with them. I feel my phone against my stomach as it begins to vibrate. Callan. Slowly, I reach for it. Ever so slowly, trying not to draw attention to

my actions until I can feel my phone. I keep my eyes fixed on the glow through the hoodie pouch and connect the call and shout as clearly as I can.

“Yovenko’s at Chloe’s!” My voice cracks, showing my fear. “They’re here... They’re here!” I warn, pleading, begging with my tone for him to come and save me.

“You stupid bitch!” Santino roars. He yanks the phone, but I hold it tight.

“Callan!” I scream tearfully, begging him to save me, even though he was using me to get to this Isabella. He is the only person who can help any of us now.

“You’ll fucking die, Santino!” Callan’s dark voice penetrates through the speaker. My phone is dropped, and a heavy heel crunches it into the carpet, cutting Callan’s rage short. I’m yanked up high and dragged down the hall, my hair being torn from my scalp.

“You deal with those two. We don’t need witnesses,” Santino instructs Ramis. Both Oscar and Chloe go into a panic, their muffled yells filling the room, their chairs scraping at the floor. I scream, kick, and shout for help, knowing it will draw attention, or at the very least slow them down. I sag when in the near distance, I hear the sound of sirens filling the streets. Oh, thank God, thank God! Either Callan has alerted them, or someone in this neighbourhood has overheard the noise and called the police. The flash of red and blue bursts around the corner at the end of the street.

Sensing they have little time, the Russians leave both Oscar and Chloe and rush me out of the apartment. I make a scene, screeching, and thrashing about to draw attention, and it does. A few people see and either lift their phones or start shouting for help as I’m bundled into a blacked-out car. Both men sit in the back with me as a small beady-looking guy wheel spins off and drives us away.

I’m panting, heart racing, my throat dry with acid. He’ll come for me. He has to, even if it’s just to get to Isabella. I’m his link. Callan can’t leave me, not if he wants her. I don’t realise that I’m frantically saying this out loud until I’m yanked harshly.

“Shut up!” A heavy lump of metal cracks into my temple, and I fall forward, blacking out.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The first thing I become aware of when I wake is the pain. My face is a mass of discomfort, tight, bruised and aching everywhere, and my lip feels like an unnatural fleshy mound on my face. The second thing I notice is the smell. The environment is dank, musty, and cold. Can you smell cold? I feel like I can. My eyes are blindfolded, my arms taut behind my back. I try not to move, and I give it my all to keep my breathing slow to feign sleep, but my heart is treacherous and is galloping ahead, squealing in fear, desperate to get away. I lie still, allowing my senses to take in my sightless surroundings. I can't hear anyone, *sense* anyone. Blinking, I sample how thick the blindfold is. If there is a possibility I can see through it, then I will use it to my advantage, but after a few minutes of trying to see through the cloth, I'm still visionless. I lie helpless and vulnerable for a long time. Time drags and ticks by at an unusual pace, both slow and too fast, each minute seeming to span an hour and pass in a millisecond. For every minute that passes, I'm caught between the notion of wasting valuable time by not fighting against my restraints or the fear of making myself known by moving. The latter wins. I'm petrified. My breathing is a shallow, rapid pant. It's cold in here, but I'm sweating, and as I become more conscious, I begin to lose feeling in my fingers and feet from the restraints knotting my flesh together. I will die here.

Model Zara Reid, kidnapped and tortured.

Biting my lip, I fight the tears, fight and lose. They slip free and fall, soaking my blindfold and wetting my hair. I'm soon sobbing, but despair turns to anger, and I thrash and scream, trying to free my limbs. I drag my face against the mattress to tug the material down, but it's too tight.

A loud creak stalls me, footsteps follow it up, and that telltale sensation of someone being close by prickles my scalp. I thrust and try to free myself, but I only succeed in chafing my skin.

"So you are awake. Good, we can begin," the voice says. I can't quite place which Yovenko it is. Twisting my face, I try to locate him by sense

alone, but I can no longer hear anything.

What follows is nothing short of inhumane: fists and boots beat me until I'm ragged and bloody. The pain is indescribable. Bones protest, and my breath wheezes out as my begging slips away with my conscious mind. At some point, I zone out, my mind twisting in on itself to protect me from the ugly truth: that I may die today. I find myself mentally surrounded by the sea. The water coats my bare skin, the sun dazzles off the surface, dancing with the waves, birds twitter, and grasses rustle with the gentle breeze. It's a haven of crystal water. I tread the water whilst the heat of the sun prickles my flesh. It feels divine. Below the water, hands slip around my waist, and I twist with a smile on my face. Dark, dark eyes smile down into mine. Callan. Where I tread the water, he stands, a smirk on his gorgeous face. He pulls me to him, and I hook my legs around his trunk of a waist, slipping into his arms and bending to kiss. Our lips touch, but unlike the pleasure I want to feel, I'm engulfed with pain. Callan disappears before my eyes, and I splash in the sea, calling out for him, frantically searching the depths. I'm far out now, alone in the vast ocean. No land in sight. No Callan. No birds, just a dark deep ocean surrounding me, the thundering sky above. The air crackles, rumbles, and lightning hits the sea, causing me to scream as another bout of pain lacerates my body. I blink, coming to, as a large fist swings to my face, and I black out once more.

The next few days are filled with intense interrogations. I've been kept awake for days, strapped to a chair. Every time I felt myself drop off, lights, bright and hot, slam on, causing my swollen lids to repel against the glare. My blindfold has been removed, but what little I can see through my now-slitted eyes isn't helpful.

It's been hours and hours of them asking me where the file is. What did my father do with it? Asking me questions about the days leading up to his murder, how he acted, did he give me anything the day of his death? Did he seem cryptic or on edge? For every question, the answers are always no, I don't know, or I don't remember. The days leading up to that night are cloudy. It's as if my mind has cut it out and refuses me admission to see something I should remember fondly. All I recall is the sickening bang of the bullet killing him—the fear I've lived with since.

“Water,” I croak. I've been without water and food for so long, I just hope they give me something. Even speaking that one word has cost me, and the pain it has invoked triggers nausea to swirl in the depths of my

stomach. A tear slips free, and I close my eyes, picturing Callan. Beautiful Callan. Where is he? Does he not care for me at all?

Russian words fill the quiet, a back and forth of two people talking. I wait, willing them to bring me something to drink. After a few moments, two sets of footsteps retreat, and I sag forward. I want to cry, but I know it will exhaust me, and I have to keep awake, keep my wits about me. The door creaks and clunks shut. There is a part of me that is waiting for one of them to laugh at me for thinking I was safe for a short time and start beating me again, but after several tense minutes, I chance a look up and find I'm alone.

Hours pass without any visitors or water. My throat is barbed-wire-sore, and each swallow costs me dearly. I'm resting with my head forwards. My tangled hair hangs limply, blood-coated and dried into clumps. I'm staring at my raw ankles when the door creaks open, and I stiffen, expecting the impact of a heavy foot or rock hard fist, but these footsteps are light, soft, feminine.

"Isabella, no talking!" a voice threatens.

Isabella!

She's here. I never thought I would feel happiness at her appearance, but her mere existence could save my life. Will save my life. Callan will come for her. I just need to hang on. It breaks my heart, but I owe this woman my life. Just by him loving her, she is saving me from the worst fate.

"C. . .Ca. . .Callan is coming," I whisper-croak. Her steps halt. She gasps, and I dare to lift my face to look at the woman who has won the love of a man I so desperately want. Our gazes collide, and her dark brown irises with my battered green ones. "He's... coming," I say in a husky tone. She has long, dark brown hair, and pretty almond eyes. She is trim and petite. Stunning, if not hollow. Her eyes are soulless. How long have these men kept her, hurt her? I dread to think what she has endured. My gaze says it all. She lifts the bottle with a straw, but just as it's close to my lips, she drops it, and I whimper at the loss.

"Isabella!" Someone shouts, making me jump, and her flinch.

"She knocked it. She's shaking," Isabella defends. Then she looks at me. "Not water," she whispers quickly. I smell it then, urine. It has drenched my feet and trickles out on the floor. Fucking urine.

"Out!" the man calls, and Isabella quickly exits the room, her dress billowing with her quick steps. The door clangs shut, and I begin to sob

quietly.

I don't know how long it has been. I have given up trying to keep some sort of track, and it may have been minutes or hours. I've begun to pass the time by humming, anything to fill the quiet, anything to drive the fear from my mind. It's humming that sends me into a light slumber. I slip off easily into a restless sleep, and moments pass before the lights blare on. They are as loud as music, jolting me awake. Groaning, I try to hide my eyes behind my hair again. The wattage is torture alone, the heat of them, salt to my already sore wounds. I shake my head, letting them see I'm awake, but the lights stay on.

"I'm awake," I croak, but they don't let up. The lights keep on attacking my retinas. Heavy footsteps pound the outer corridor, so loud they sound like gunshots. My disorientated mind can't even detect one sound from another. The door slams open, ricocheting off the wall. I flinch and whimper, waiting for the beating to start, but Callan suddenly fills my view. I try to open my mouth, but he shushes me.

"Don't speak. God, Zara, I couldn't find you. Fuck, you're a mess." He is tugging at my ties, trying to free me.

"She's... here... Isabella," I confirm in a rasp, blinking to find his black eyes. Shock. Relief. Anguish. Gratitude and regret all fill his stare at once. Eyes that at one point seemed emotionless and void now pour out a truth to me I never wanted to witness. He holds my look for a moment, but then without hesitation, he is twisting away and storming from the room. Leaving me alone. My shoulders jerk, gasping for breath. The pain is too much. He left me for her. I wail softly, too exhausted to cry properly. The next pair of hands to fall on me are Tony's. For once, I am happy to see him.

I'm eased into the back of a car. Tony clips me in and moves fluidly round to the front to slip in behind the wheel. Movement to my left brings my head around where Callan is escorting Isabella out. Their hands are locked tight, and her face is awash with relief, tear-stricken but so grateful. He pulls her face to his, and with his back to mine, I can only imagine he is kissing her. His head turns my way, so I dip my gaze, too hurt to witness it any further. The engine purrs to life, and Tony twists round to look at me.

"You're all over the news. Best to keep your head down," he tells me.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

I scream as gunfire breaks out around us. “Stay down!” Tony roars. I don’t. Can’t. I search for Callan. He’s out there. What if he gets injured? A man dressed in black appears from the side of the building, a large gun resting on his forearm as he litters the air with bullets, shooting at us. Everything happens at once, too quick and not fast enough. I want this to be over. The car clangs as bullets spray the metal. I scream and try to scramble away, but I’m too hurt, weak. I search the back seat frantically, but there are no bullets inside. “We’re safe. It’s bulletproof,” Tony shouts over the gunfire.

There is a roar of anger from outside the vehicle that draws my head away from the man who is trying to hurt us, to where Callan is now pushing Isabella backwards out of harm's way and into Stalin’s chest. Callan laughs manically, and I watch in horror as he draws his weapon, walking without fear towards the psycho shooting at us. He doesn’t falter or blink, not even when a bullet whips past him. I cry out, terrified for him, but he’s so calm. Lethal and unfazed by the danger he is in. He aims, fires, and the man drops forward, dead. I’m clutching my throat. What the hell just happened? I knew he was dangerous, suspected he had killed, but I’ve never seen someone welcome gunfire and walk towards it. He showed no respect for his own life, just that of Isabella’s.

“Oh my God.”

“Zara, get the fuck down.” Tony snaps. How the hell is he so indifferent to all of this? “Zara,” he snaps, blinking me back into action. “Head down.”

I nod in understanding. The last thing I want now is to be seen. I want to slink into a hole and hide, recover. I don’t want to be hounded by the press. I slip down in the back seat, resting my head, and as soon as we begin to cruise, I feel myself giving in to sleep. I’m woken briefly as I’m moved from the car, and the next time I come to, I find myself in a spacious room. The high ceilings and metal sleeper beams overhead remind me of a warehouse, but nothing about the furnishings suggest that to be true. I’m on a drip and pain-free mostly, just uncomfortable. I know I should be in considerable pain, but the washy sensation tells me I’m on strong painkillers.

Jefferson steps in and smiles when he sees me alert.

“Oh, you’re awake. You look worse than it is.” He smiles kindly at me.

I scoff and relax back on the cushion, wincing at the amount of pain I'm in. "Well, that's a relief," I mutter, finding my throat is still causing a tickly rasp. He looks back over his shoulder at me. I smirk and roll my eyes, but it starts a slow throb in my skull, so I make a mental note not to do it again.

"I'm sure you feel terrible, and rightly so. One fractured rib and a mild concussion, the rest is just cosmetic bruising. No internal bleeding. Somehow, you managed to withstand hell. You're a strong cookie, Miss Reid," he muses, checking my vitals and jotting something down. "How are you feeling?" He looks directly at me and shines a light in my eyes.

"Like I don't like the light." I'll happily live in the dark for a month after those lights the Yovenko's tortured me with.

"Any pain?" he wonders, moving from one side of the bed to the other.

"Honestly, I ache all over. I feel stiff and sore," I say, meeting his eyes through my swollen ones.

"You've been out for just over four days. We sedated you. You were dehydrated, exhausted. Your body needs to heal. Would you like some food, water?" Jefferson looks to me from the end of the bed, and his soft and sympathetic look makes my gut twist. It's a reminder of what I have just survived.

"Please." I've never been a fan of water, but right now, I could glug down a gallon, and it still wouldn't feel enough. I want to bathe in it and stick a funnel in my mouth. "Can you not let anyone know I'm awake?" I say in a rush as he nears the door. I can't possibly cope with any interaction right now. Even this short time with Jefferson has worn me out. He stops his hand on the handle as he looks at me, questioning. "I just need to process." Pulling on some hair, I twiddle it through my fingers, chewing on my lip to avoid my mouth trembling. Internally, I'm screaming to get it together, but there is a small part of me that calmly tells me to let it in, accept what has happened, and leave it behind.

Nodding, he gives me a sad smile. "I can try, but this has been like a swing door," he comments dryly and steps through, closing said door behind him. I avert my gaze and look to the ceiling. My eyes are open, but I can still see that place, smell it, feel it. Their faces are as potent and detailed as they were only days ago. Voices, thick and accented, ring through my brain, mocking, vile, a sickening combination that I wish to seek solace from. I almost want Jefferson to put me back to sleep—anything to not feel or think again.

The door swings open, just like Jefferson predicted, and Callan stands there, chest heaving. I roll my head away and close my eyes. Why is he here? He's done his job.

I hear his voice, the muted rumble, it's an odd comfort, but I hear no words. I physically and mentally cannot survive any more trauma, and my heart has already broken. Being in his presence is nothing more than a kick to the gut. He's there right in my face, waving, clicking his fingers. I blink, but my focus is blank, not on him but neither anywhere else. My skin tingles from where he touches it. My face is being shaken, and he is calling silent words over his shoulder.

I see from some disjointed view, watching from another place, a window into my life as this all happens. Even from this angle, I will him away. It's too painful. I don't want even a footprint of his existence in my life. I shut him out. Remove him, close my shattered heart. He is an echo.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I wake slowly and groan as the usual wave of pain lingers throughout. I've been in bed for days, and although the pain meds are helping, I need to be mobile. I want to get out of bed, and after a few attempts, I manage to sit upright and bring my legs around so they are hanging off the edge of the bed. A movement to my right has my head turning. Callan is stalking towards me.

"Zara, what are you doing?" he mutters, trying to lift my legs and lie me back. He cups my face, and I hold from flinching. He looks at me, right at me, like all those times when he would simply watch me. It's the biggest slap in the face when I know the woman he loves is probably next door. I stare hard enough until all I can see is my own reflection in his hard gaze.

"Jefferson," I demand, twisting my face away. I can't look at him. Something in me won't allow it.

"What's up? I can help. Zara. Let me help." Callan's heavily tattooed hand comes up and tries to smooth my hair away. I fix my stare on something on the wall.

"I need Jefferson," I tell him calmly—too calmly after the stunt he pulled. How does Isabella feel about all of this?

He grates out a deep sigh and stands. "I never meant to hurt you. It was never my intention," he tells me grimly. Good, I hope he feels guilty.

"Those without intention usually cause the most damage," I murmur, recalling something my father once said. I never truly understood the meaning until now.

"Zara?" He hesitates at the door.

"Callan, please go."

Steady footsteps become faint, and I know he has gone. I sigh with relief and wait for Jefferson to enter, and when he does, I ask that he remove my catheter so I can get up and use the toilet.

"Do you need help walking?" He holds my arm, steadying me.

I get my balance and give myself a few moments to adjust. I don't feel dizzy, so I shake my head and hobble to the small door.

“Oh, that’s a wardrobe,” he says, stalling me and biting back a smirk. I swallow a laugh, and he chuckles. “The bathroom is through the main room, this way.” Who is out there? I don't have time to ask, as he holds me and encourages me along. “Slow and steady wins the race,” he tells me kindly.

“I’m not entering any races any time soon,” I scoff. My aim is not to look up and see who is here, but I can’t help it. I see Stalin and Tony sitting in armchairs watching TV quietly. On the sofa, Callan and Isabella sit. Multiple faces turn in my direction, and Callan stands quickly.

“What’s going on?” he demands, looking at Jefferson. He must know he will get nothing from me, not even a look. I keep my focus ahead.

“Loo break,” Jefferson reveals.

Callan walks across the room towards us and nods his friend away. When I slant a combative look his way, he grits his jaw and lowers his head to mine.

“Just try me,” he growls. I drop my gaze. I have neither the energy nor strength to deal with his level of aggression.

He scoops me up and stalks to the bathroom. Ducking my head, I flush with unease. How is Isabella okay with this? Does she know I slept with Callan? I’m ashamed that whilst she was being traumatised, I was hooking up with her partner. Does she hate me? I would. Callan lowers me in front of the toilet and helps me sit down.

“I’ve got it from here.” I grunt in agony. Just him carrying me has caused my ribs to spasm with pain.

“I don’t doubt it. Still not going.” Crossing his big arms, he leans against the side and waits for me. After a few minutes, he speaks. “Stage fright?” he wonders. I indulge him and look up, seeing he is fighting a smirk that I can’t reciprocate.

“It’s uncomfortable,” I say through gritted teeth. Jeez, moments ago, I had a tube up there.

“Take your time,” he says, clearing his throat.

“I was,” I bite. Idiot. What is he doing? “Look, I can’t go with you in here,” I say when minutes pass by. I must look a state, sitting on the toilet, robe wrapped awkwardly around me, hair a mess.

“Why don't you get a shower? If it relaxes you, just do it in there,” he says, moving to turn the shower on.

Wrinkling my nose, I laugh. “I am not peeing in the shower!”

“Fine, piss on the floor then.” God, he is so vulgar. “Get a shower. You will feel better.” The water turns on, and the sound alone has me aching to get under the spray. Why is he so argumentative all the time? I throw him a dark look, and he chuckles. “Glad to see you're still in there somewhere.” Rolling my eyes, I use the side to stand, grunting as pain lances my side.

I edge towards the shower and hold the open door for support. Callan leans his big frame against the other side.

“Get out then.” I look directly at him, but he laughs.

“Zara, quit fucking around, and get in.”

“Callan, get out.” I try to stay calm, but I sound frustrated.

“Get in.”

“Get out!” I scream. He jumps and looks shocked. I'm shaking. “Just fucking get out,” I cry.

The door opens, and I twist to find Isabella staring wide-eyed at us.

“I'll help her.” Her soft voice is angelic, pretty, and I close my eyes. She is so innocent-sounding, and with her big almond eyes, I can see why Callan is drawn to her.

I'll do anything to get rid of him, even be alone with her.

“I'll be outside.” He presses a kiss to her hair, and my heart revolts at the sight. She stiffens, and I berate myself for being so selfish with my emotions when she has endured hell. She nods, and he slips out, leaving us both alone. Silence falls.

“I will be fine,” I tell her.

“I know. I'll sit here.” She points to the sideboard and takes herself over to it, and hops on the side. With shaky hands, I untie the belt and shrug the robe off. Her gasp, even though light, is heard over the spray, and I scrunch my eyes tight and slowly move under the water. It hurts but eases too. I feel exhausted and ready to fall. It pummels my body, but I manage to stand still, even if a little wobbly, letting it ricochet over me. Reaching for a sponge, washing where I can, something about the water washing my body clean causes me to unravel. I sob and wash as furiously as my bruised limbs allow, trying to rid it all from my mind.

“It doesn't work.” Her soft voice filters through my pain. “What happened to you was not your fault. It was horrendous, but you've already

allowed them too much of your time, your life. Don't give them anymore. You won. It's okay to be sad, but don't let them take this victory from you too," she says with such conviction that I feel ashamed for breaking so easily after such a short period of time under their watch. How long was she with them? What has she seen—dealt with?

"How did you cope?" I tremble. I'm a little awed but curious too.

"I knew one day, somehow, he'd come. I had to. Otherwise, I had nothing," she admits. Callan, of course. And he did. He went to every length, broke every door, crossed every legal line, and cheated people out of money and happiness. What would it be like to have someone love you like that?

"He loves you," I reply softly. I can't hate her, and somehow, I don't even feel jealous. She deserves him after all she has been through.

"Yes, he does." Her voice sounds far away, as though her mind is elsewhere. "But things are different now," she replies quietly.

"Can you pass me that towel?" I point with my chin, and she picks it up and holds it out for me. I wrap up, and she passes me another for my hair.

"I'll get you some clothes. Maybe just sit on the toilet until I get back," she suggests sweetly, leaving me. I make my way and sit down. I finally manage to go to the toilet and clean up before she returns with a pair of lounge pants and a matching t-shirt. "Tony has made dinner. It's bolognese. He's a pretty decent cook," she says, filling the quiet as she helps me into my clothes.

"Thanks." I chance a look in the mirror and see a battered woman looking back at me.

"It will fade." She opens the door, and I follow her out, but exhaustion wins, making me wobble on the spot. Tony, who is nearest me, rushes to steady me and helps me to the table where Callan is standing, trying to gain my attention. I ignore him. Seeing him brings me such pain, but there is also anger at how he has treated me. Used me. If he had been honest about Isabella, I would have helped. Stalin plates up spaghetti and bolognese. The pungent smell of garlic fills the air, and after days without food, my mouth waters. There are two empty places, and I move to take the one away from Callan. Isabella takes the seat beside him, and I keep my gaze ahead on Tony.

Reaching up for my usual comfort, my hand comes up empty. Panicking, I begin grappling at my neck, searching for my necklace.

“My... where’s my—”

“Gone.” Callan’s dark gaze meets mine. Gone! No, but it was my father’s. Hot tears spring in my eyes. “The necklace was broken when we retrieved you.”

“But we can fix it, right?” I meet the others’ eyes. Sympathy isn't only what stares back at me, but pity, too. Isabella looks pale and shifts awkwardly. “What’s going on?” Something is happening. Something I know nothing about. Why are they looking at me like that?

“When did your father give you that necklace?” Stalin wonders idly. However, his tone is at odds with his keen stare. Expectant looks hold me in my chair. The atmosphere, already thick, is now cement-like.

“My birthday. I’d just turned twelve.” For once, I want to converse with Callan. I flick a look at him, frowning, waiting for his input to my questioning gaze.

“The file that the Russians were after—” he begins, and I nod, urging him on and dreading his answer all the same, “you were wearing it,” Callan delivers slowly, again suspenseful looks watch on in silence. I’m horrified, and if I had the energy to stand abruptly, I would. Any colour I had in my face leaves rapidly.

My hand goes back to my vacant neck.

“No.” I shake my head. My father would never have done such a thing. I don't believe them. “I want to see,” I snap.

The deep, low, astonished laugh that fills the room brings my head around. Callan is watching me closely.

“What was on that file will never be made accessible to you. It’s not for your eyes,” he spits, “why would you want to see?” Aversion hangs on his tongue.

“No, I just meant I wanted proof. My father loved me—he’d never—” I’m shaking my head vigorously. All those times I held onto that piece of jewellery for comfort, only to be holding onto a sickness in this world.

“It’s gone.” That’s Stalin. “It was anonymously handed to the FBI,” he delivers indifferently, moving food around his plate then filling his mouth.

“But my necklace, they'll make the connection!” Oh my god, they will tie me to those vile humans, and trafficking will be tarred with my name. I’m going to be sick.

“Calm down, Zara. The necklace is here, but the file is gone. I doubt your father ever meant for it to get to this. I think he hid it for safekeeping.

No mobster is ever going to assume an innocent child is carrying their secrets around her neck. It was your father's life insurance. We are certain he intended to hand it over to the FBI, only they got to him first." I'm breathing roughly, my hands braced on the arms of the chair, half out of my seat. I lower down and let it all sink in. I recall my father telling me the necklace was more than just a gift. That it represented happiness, freedom, and hope. He didn't just mean my happiness or freedom, and it wasn't just about my hope but the thousands and thousands of women and possibly children he had tried to save by risking his own life. I think of all the lives affected between his death and now, and how I could have done something before if I had only known. My head is a mess of chaotic thoughts. But one person is at the forefront of my mind, and she is sitting across from me at this table. I look at her, shame and guilt clouding my vision.

"I didn't know. I would have..." I clear my throat, sickened by revulsion at what I could have stopped.

"I know," she whispers, her face both pale and pink.

"I'm sorry," I croak, and she clears her throat, averting her eyes from those around us.

My friend's terrified face flits to the front of my mind.

"What about Oscar? Chloe?" I say in a panic.

"Fine," Tony rumbles.

"Unfortunately," Callan spits.

"Shaken up, but okay," Tony assures me. "They are staying at Winter Manor." Oscar's mother's home. It's possibly the safest place. I nod, but it doesn't dispel the unease pulsing through me.

"He knows my real name," I whisper, worried this will somehow come back on Oscar and Chloe.

"They know nothing," Tony chimes in. "Oscar thinks Callan got you caught up in something. For all he knows, Olivia was another victim of trafficking, and the Russians got their wires crossed."

So Callan has taken the fall for me. I eye him and find he is watching me astutely. I drop my gaze, and we all eat the remainder of the meal in silence, each of us avoiding eye contact. I can barely stomach anything, so I move the food around, eager to leave the table and hide away with my thoughts.

"How are you feeling?" That's Jefferson. I tilt my head, only to find multiple reserved gazes. He doesn't mean my father.

“Like I went a few rounds with a Russian.” No point lying. It's evident I'm in pain: mentally and physically.

“You're due more pain relief in an hour or two,” he tells me as he loads his mouth with pasta. I pick at my meal, still not hungry, and besides, each mouthful is too uncomfortable for me to enjoy it. Even lifting the fork is difficult.

“Good?” Tony asks, trying to lighten the mood. For a moment, I'm thrown back to that room and the bottle of piss I was nearly given to drink.

I swallow awkwardly and cough.

“Yes, my jaw hurts, that's all.” Everyone has cleared their plates, yet mine is still half full. If Callan hadn't come when he did, they could have sent me off to that person who had paid for me. I shudder inwardly. I don't even know if the Yovenko's are dead. What if they come back for me?

“If I were to give you pain relief now, you'd fall asleep.” Jefferson laughs.

“Sounds good to me,” I say honestly. I don't want to think anymore. It's been over a week, but my bruising is still visible. The pain is more bearable, but I suspect I've become more used to where I hurt the most and how to avoid aggravating it. The medication is helping a lot.

“I'm afraid that will have to wait,” Callan interjects, “it's time, Zara.” The way he says those words, his tone, the serious shine in his eyes, and the hush over the table tells me that my first request, the reason I got into this mess in the first place, is finally transpiring. My heart thumps painfully behind my breast.

I give a soft but sure nod.

“Okay.”

~

Twenty-four hours later, I am sitting in the passenger seat of Callan's car, disguised by a blonde wig and blue lenses to hide my natural green. My heart is hammering rapidly, as everything I have known over the last decade is about to be no more.

“Won't people wonder where I am?” I ask. It's been bugging me since Callan announced I was leaving, but so much has happened in the last few hours that I've only now been able to vocalise it.

“No, they will mourn you because they believe you are dead.” His emotionless tone makes me flinch. Dead?

“You faked my death?” I whisper, shocked and horrified.

“I didn’t need to. The police found your DNA and plenty of blood where the Yovenko’s kept you. We burnt the place to the ground. The only evidence they found is what we wanted them to see.” Are they still alive? “They announced to the public that they believe your body has been disposed of in what they can only describe as a kidnapping gone wrong. If they hadn’t released a statement, I would have gone through with faking your death.” He looks at me briefly over the console. “Did you expect me to relocate you and everything to be fine? Zara, we have to make the world believe you’re dead. This way, no one looks for you, and you can start afresh and begin again. I have moved funds to secure your future. Stalin was sure not to leave a paper trail. It’s your own money, offshore. It’s safe and under a new name. Everything will make sense when you arrive at the location.” He indicates and pulls into a dimly lit car park and drives into a hanger.

“Oh. Okay.” Swallowing my anxiety, I stare at the dashboard.

“Your accounts were cleared, and the police believe that as no ransom was taken, they hit your accounts personally and disappeared.”

“Oh god, are they still alive?” I baulk.

“No, you’re safe. Keep wearing your wig, lenses. You have others stocked when you arrive. It’s remote. Keep your head down. Don’t make friends. This isn’t going to be easy, Zara. It’ll be lonely. But you’ll be safe,” he assures me. Wear wigs. Pretend to be someone else *again*. “Come on.”

I’m not ready to say goodbye to him.

“If they’re dead, why am I hiding?” My whisper is laced with pain. Why is he going through with this? If they’re gone, I’m safe.

“Men like that don’t work alone, Zara. Men like the Yovenko’s want revenge.” I swallow the fear his words bring. Just like him, The Yovenko’s have a team of people, family even. My involvement with them will have repercussions.

Callan exits the car, and I follow suit, easing out of the car in discomfort. When I shut the door, I see my reflection. I still can’t believe it’s me. I look so different. Younger. Stalin and Isabella followed us in another car, and they both stand aside as Callan rounds the car and takes my elbow, helping me walk. I feel wooden as I walk beside him. He holds out a small bag for me.

The desire to turn into his arms and cry is too heavy to disguise. I look at him with hopeful eyes.

“Essentials, everything else will be there when you arrive,” he tells me. He sounds so vacant. Indifferent. My shoulders shudder, and I fight the whimper working its way up my throat.

This is it. Goodbye. I don't quite know what to say. Or how to act. Frowning, I move in and hug him, needing the contact.

“Thank you.” I catch sight of Isabella over his shoulder. When she catches me looking, she turns her gaze away and says something to Stalin, who smiles.

“Of course, angel.” Thick arms hold me close. I go stiff, but he sighs, and drops his head into my hair, inhaling deeply.

“I'm happy for you,” I add, my voice breaking. “She's really beautiful,” I tell him, injecting warmth into my voice.

Callan's breathing falters, and he pulls away slowly, looking at me in confusion.

“This is what this is about.” He shakes his head. “Why you pushed me away? Zara?” he demands, holding me at arm's length.

“Callan, I...” Embarrassment burns through me. I have no right to hate him for loving someone who deserves his love.

“Isabella is my sister.” His confession spears my gut. Sister. Not girlfriend. I search his gaze. Then why is he sending me away? The torment in my eyes must say as much.

He cups my face. “God, you silly woman. You silly, beautiful woman. I love you.” He smiles sadly. “You gave me light when I had none, do you know that? I was barely functioning before you. You breathed that back into me, and I am so fucking grateful.”

“I don't understand. Why?” Why is he sending me away? I can't believe I have beaten myself up with this, and she is his sister. I never made the connection when he mentioned her before. He has always been so private. I assumed Isabella was the cause of his lack of emotion, the walls. Every rule he enforced was because, and for, her.

I was so wrapped up in the hurt caused by him using me and my connection to the Yovenko's to find her that all reasonable logic fled. It never occurred to me that his desire to find Isabella was as simple as her being his sister. He never spoke of family. He said he was a lone wolf, like

me. I didn't give him the chance to explain. I ran, and then I was taken. Why did he not confess when I came round, explain himself?

“That’s exactly why I’m sending you away. I love you enough to put you first. I won't forget our time, Zara. I love you, beautiful.”

“Callan.” I choke. *Wait, no!*

“Be safe.” He pecks my lips and steps back, nodding at someone over my shoulder. I’m dumbfounded. He’s letting me go. Sending me away.

A hand takes my wrist and tugs me towards the aeroplane steps. I look back, but Callan is walking with purpose to his car. His door slams loudly, and with a loud rev, he takes off, squealing out of the hanger. He can’t just go. “No!” I cry. I look at Stalin and Isabella, tormented by so many emotions. Why aren’t they helping?

Isabella cups her mouths as Stalin ushers her into the car.

Tony pulls me up the steps, and I shake my head, “No.”

“Zara, this is for the best.”

“He left me. I don't want to go.” I sob, pleading with Tony to do something. Stalin’s car starts, and then he is driving away. “Tony, please?” I grip his hand tightly.

“The only way we are leaving this airfield is on this plane. He left because he knows it’s what needs to be done. Callan has thought this through. If there was a way for you to stay—if he wanted you to stay—” Tony replies sympathetically, trailing off as my face crumples.

If Callan wanted me to stay, he would never have driven me here.

I choke through my tears as his words reverberate through me. Tony helps me onboard and nods to the Captain as he buckles me in my seat. I’m numb. He’s gone. Just like that. He left me. I love you, but goodbye.

How could he walk away?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Six Months later....

It's been one hundred and eighty plus days of silence. The kind my soul had craved for years. I've never felt so light in all my life, so calm. Each morning is as easy as breathing in fresh air. Not only do I have copious amounts of time on my hands, I have anonymity, but I'm alone, and the only thing I have to keep me company is my heartache. Starting over was never going to be as simple as just turning up somewhere pretending to be someone new. I've conceded to such things and have made changes to help with daily life, small changes that have become second nature to me, as easy as smiling.

Another thing I've begun to do without feeling the strain of it around my lips.

I've noticed the tension has slowly slipped away and the pain, too. The pain was crushing. Palpable. It has taken me a long time, but I'm finally able to accept nothing will ever be the same and to be grateful for what I had before now, for the people I loved before this life, *for him*. Those memories I look back on fondly. Some still feel as tender as a bruise, but it is a small reminder that I fell in love, and for that, I'm thankful. I've had little contact with the outside world. A laptop and new phone were both here on arrival and have kept me up to date with what is transpiring on the fringes of my old life. Miranda and Georgie finalised my perfume and released it in my memory. They named it Zara. I cried for days on finding out. I cried at the loss of them from my life, the loss of Callan and Oscar, and at losing myself. Images of my funeral and the devastated faces left me distraught. I know they are safe, and that is a small price to pay.

I no longer look. Can't. Watching Oscar's downfall after my supposed death and seeing Callan's images suddenly popping up on social media with woman after woman had my broken heart turning to chiselled ice.

It's better this way. I know that no matter how ashamed I am for hurting Oscar, there is a small part of me that is still devastated that he assisted the Yovenkos in capturing me. The physical torture at their hands still plays on my mind. It could have been so much worse, and I know that, but it never makes it easier to forget the crunch of a boot to my stomach or fist in my face. I do wonder if his downfall to drink and drugs is his own guilt crushing him.

I've been awake for a while, but my alarm tinkers to my left and I roll to switch it off. I have tried to remain in a routine and busy. The sun streams through the wispy white curtain, and beyond that, the rough blanket of Aegean sea lulls against the shoreline.

I had no idea what would happen when I got on that plane or where I would end up, but the modest villa on the outskirts of a small village in Crete wasn't one of them. At first, being in Greece was a cruel reminder of a time with Callan, but I have grown to love the connection I still have with him. I get out of bed and head straight for the shower as always. My hair is longer than it's ever been, but I can't ask anyone to cut it, and it's easier to plait at this length. I twist my hair into a braid and tie it into place.

When I step out of the shower, I put on my robe to go and grab some breakfast, like I do every morning. Even for February, the weather isn't bad, and I take my breakfast out onto the small decking leading down to the rugged coastline. This is my favourite view. The villa is small enough that it doesn't draw attention, yet private enough that I'm left alone and with the open access to the small secluded cove, where I can enjoy some freedom without interruption. The one-storey white building circles a courtyard, which is perfect for privacy too. The rooms are wide and sparse, the windows shuttered, and not once has anyone shown any sign they recognise me. I believe that's because most of the residents are all elderly or as shut off from the real world as this village is. They have never heard of me or Callan or anyone else on the 'A' list. Nevertheless, I still take precautions when leaving the villa. I'm sure if I left the house with hair as black as night, the town folk would still call me Lia. Another bitter pill to swallow was saying goodbye to both Zara Reid and Olivia Monroe, but the note attached to the package containing my new identity and electronics softened the torment.

You will always be Zara to me and Olivia to your father, and this way, you can keep a little part of yourself.

Be safe, Lia Roem.

All my love C x

I had a new passport, ID card, and bank account. You name it, Callan had covered it, and the deeds to the villa were in Lia's name. He plucked letters from my previous lives and conjured up a new name for me. Another thing I was grateful for. No matter how much I had hated him for walking away from me, he had still been thoughtful about providing a new life for me and giving it meaning.

Finishing up my breakfast, I wash up and find a pair of jeans and a lightweight knit jumper. I pin my now-dyed blonde hair up and place the light blue contacts in my eyes, ridding my face of my usual green. I collect up my bag, slip my pumps on, and lock up. It's still fairly early, but I know most in the small town will be awake by now. The farmers' market will be a hive of quiet activity, and I can already smell the fresh bread lingering on the sea air.

It takes me no more than ten minutes to make the journey. I pass a small house on my way. The old man living there rarely ventures out and seems to be happy in the little bubble he has created, just as I am. My hair wisps and blows as the sea air catches it. Glancing over, I see him ambling around outside in his dusty front yard, and he lifts his craggy arm, so I smile back. Sometimes, I have debated doing something nice for him, such as dropping some bread off or fresh fish, but Callan was adamant I keep to myself if I could.

As soon as I hit the village edge, the roads turn from dust to cobble. The streets are narrow and are decorated with different coloured sash windows or flower baskets, the fragrance, sweet, and light. I weave between streets, down wider roads, minding the odd cyclist or old car, pottering along until I turn a corner and the main village centre opens up before me. It's small and nothing like the size of the nearest town. The market is all but a few stalls laden with fresh produce. I don't need much as my fridge is stocked, but I do enjoy having a nose and picking up the odd treat. The rush of tiny footsteps pounds the ground, and three girls run past, giggling. One, a dark-haired little thing struggling to keep up, swings a look over her shoulder.

"Hello, Miss Lia," she says breathlessly, her toothy grin bringing a smile to my face.

"Hi, Thalia," I call softly. She waves a petite arm and races off after the two faster girls. That was one person I couldn't ignore. After a few weeks of

her approaching me and asking me an abundance of questions, I finally gave in and started to chat back to her. She was persistent, sweet, and I could see the residents eyeing me suspiciously and with annoyance that I was trying to snub a cute, innocent girl. Now she surprises me with flowers or a picture she has made. I'm slowly being welcomed into the community. I reach a stand, pull my string bag free and put a few fresh oranges in, and the lady who owns the stall smiles at me.

"Storm later," she tells me in broken English. I glance at the clear sky and frown.

"Oh, really." It looks perfect to me. I'd expect the island to be more prone to storms in the summer months when it's really hot, or maybe that's because I was used to that in England.

"Stay indoors," she warns. I nod at her and thank her whilst I pay. I move on and buy some bread. I mooch around the stalls, picking up one or two more bits and head back up the dusty path to my home. I never stay in the centre long, favouring the seclusion of the villa. The man is gone, but beyond his property, I see a boat floating in the sun. I hope they know a storm is coming. I watch it bobbing idly under the cloudy sky. One thing I haven't done since being here is get on a boat. I'm sure someone local could take me out. I wouldn't dare navigate the sea alone. I decide to ask someone in the village about going on a boat tour the next time I wander down for supplies.

I'm sweating by the time I reach my door, and stepping in, I welcome the cool air. It is fairly oppressive outside; I realise. Is that how the lady knew a storm was brewing? I need to remember to shut all the sash windows before I go to bed, I think, putting my bag down. I'm yet to experience a storm here. So far, the weather has been mostly sunny and dry, with the odd day of rainfall.

The rest of the day I spend cleaning and washing. By evening, the sky has blackened, and I've locked myself away safely. Without the added light, the villa seems smaller. Rain pounds the wooden slats outside, and I can hear the sea crashing below. I worry about the boat and if they made it home okay. The only thing to keep me occupied is going into my little workshop; it's a tiny room filled with jewellery I've made. I'd spent hours watching YouTube, making mistake after mistake, throwing ruined pieces into the bin or using them for decoration around the house, but now I'm managing to produce some nice pieces. I've even considered selling some

bits online. I settle in and get to work making a leaf design bracelet I have wanted to try. I zone out, and the storm becomes nothing more than a comforting rumble. Hours pass, and I lift my arm, happy with the delicate wreath around my wrist. It matches the simple leaf ring I made last week. I slip that on my finger, tidy up the room, and shut the light off.

It's nearly midnight by the time I remove my lenses and clean my face. I double-check all the locks and stay by the door for a moment, staring out of the only uncovered door leading onto the back decking. It's sheltered by a small veranda but offers a view of the sea and small beach below. The sky lights up as thunder roars and rolls ahead, the sea only visible when the lightning screams across the dark clouds. It's turbulent and dangerous.

I stand and stare out at the fierceness in front of me, wondering what Callan is doing right now. I often wonder if he thinks of me. He said so much, but his actions had me guessing every word until I learnt to believe my feelings were the only true ones. I sigh and wish for him to be happy. After everything he did for me, he deserves that much. For all he has endured with his family, he deserves happiness and tucked away in this remote life. I could never give him that. He knew that. I pad to bed and listen to the pound of rain until I'm drifting into a deep sleep, thinking of black irises and intricate tattoos.



I wake with a start. My alarm is loud, and when I lift my phone, I can see it's been going off for a while. I never sleep as deeply as that. I roll out of bed, groaning, and head straight for the shower, waking myself up. Outside is a mess. The wind has knocked pots over, and my small table and chair set is askew, with dust and sand littering the decking.

"Great." I dry and dress quickly, making a drink and picking up a banana for convenience so that I can get outside to sort out the mess the storm has caused. I replace pots, sweep the floor, and neaten the place up. Something in the corner of my eye has me looking down. Below, in the cove, tied to the wooden dock, is the boat. I frown and head inside. Unease prickles at my scalp, but I try to calm my paranoia by telling myself they anchored up to keep safe from the storm. Tony supplied me with an emergency contact number, saying I was only to use if I was in danger. I don't wish to jump to conclusions. I did too much of that with Callan. I still wonder if I had made the connection about Isabella, would I be here now?

I'd planned to head into the village again today for lunch. Seeing everyone milling about and being a part of each other's lives yesterday made me want to return and enjoy it all from the open front café. I expect the boat owner to head up the steep path and knock on my door, but as morning passes, I realise they have gone.

I check over my reflection before I leave. I quite like my hair blonde. It's very girl next door cute and makes my sharp cheeks seem softer. I wonder what Vogue would write about me now. They certainly wouldn't be raving about my undeniable beauty. That part of me is gone. It's cooler out since the storm, so I pick up my jacket, shrugging it on as I leave. The trail is damp, and the barren terrain is soaking it up like a starved man. I keep my pace quick and find the village far quieter today. When I enter the centre, people are milling around, tidying up and knocking nails into signs that succumbed to the storm. I decide to help and pick up a turned over chair, placing it back against the wall of someone's home.

Thalia races towards me. "My window broke!" she exclaims. Her little feet are bare and smattered with mud. She kicks her toes on the cobbles and wipes her cheek, adding more dirt. "Did yours, Miss Lia?" She blinks, wiping again and causing more mess to spread on her face. It makes me want to laugh. She is adorable.

I crouch down and smile at her. I enjoy our little chats, but after the life I've lived and witnessed, I could never bring a child into it. Perhaps that's why I give her so much of my time.

"No, just my table. I need to fix it," I tell her. Her English is good, but I refrain from saying so.

She gulps in air when I mention my table and smiles at me when I grin at her.

"You're pretty," she says that a lot to me.

"Thank you. You're very pretty too," I reciprocate as always.

"Papa says I'm going to be the most beautiful in the village." She is proud as punch, and it makes me smile widely.

"Oh, I bet."

She takes my hand.

"Come on, look at the mess down here," she says, tugging me along. I go, smiling along the way. She greets everyone, and I smile a hello too. Faces appear from windows and doors, watching us move through the square.

“Here’s the mess.” She huffs. “What a mess!” She shakes her head, and I laugh, looking to see the response of others watching close by. I freeze, and my face pales. Black eyes and dark hair move back from the shadows. *Callan.*

“Callan?” I call. I move to go to him, the small hand in mine slipping free as I walk towards the alcove.

“Ouch!” she cries, and I turn, rushing to help her. Blood spills from her foot, and her lip wobbles.

“Careful, there is glass all over the street.” I lift her up, twisting to look for Callan, but there is no one there. The doorway is empty. I search the streets, but I see no sign of him. Maybe it wasn’t him. I didn’t get a good look, I reason, trying to calm my racing heart. I’m seeing things. I must be. He made it clear we would never see one another again.

A man comes towards me, and Thalia puts her arms out, but I’m too busy searching the streets for a beast of a man. He’d be too hard to miss. Thalia alone would remark on his appearance. But those around us seem unfazed. Someone would have seen him. He’s not here, I tell my frantic heart.

“Papa!” My attention returns to the little girl.

“I’m so sorry. She’s cut her foot,” I say, looking to where she is bleeding. He takes her from me and stares at me openly. I worry he has recognised me, but a woman slaps him up the back of his head and snaps at him in Greek. Although I have tried to learn some, I have no idea what she has said, but I can tell by his red cheeks it was to do with me.

“Papa likes your hair!” Thalia giggles.

I look shocked. I see him shrug, and his wife rolls her eyes, puts her hands on her hips and smirks at me. I relax slightly and focus on Thalia.

“I didn’t know there was glass. I’m sorry.” I grimace at her parents.

“It’s okay, Miss Lia,” Thalia says.

Her mother pulls her from her father’s arms and inspects the small nick on her foot, wiping it clean.

“Go and find your shoes.” Her accent is thick. “Not to worry.” She smiles.

“Okay. I’m glad Thalia is okay.” My heart palpitates, causing me to feel on edge. I need to get home. “Sorry, I need to get going,” I tell them, smiling politely. Thalia grins at me, and I give her a little wave as she pulls her shoes on.

Chapter Thirty

I trudge back up the track, feeling out of sorts and shaken. I'm not far from the old man's house when I get the feeling I'm being followed. I stop and wait, listening out for the crunch of footsteps, and when I hear it again, I turn and gasp. Callan is standing a few metres away, kitted out in black jeans and an open-neck black shirt. Pressing my hand to my mouth, I shake my head. It's like seeing him again for the first time. I have no words, and for some reason, I refuse to allow myself to get excited. I don't want to fall victim to hope. We stare just like all those times before, each observing, neither speaking. It's a few tense and emotional minutes before he speaks. I had almost forgotten the sound of his voice, rich, rough, and so deep. I step forward, needing to go to him, but I can't allow myself further heartache.

"Hello, Zara." He smiles sadly at me, and I hold my bag tightly for support. I come to the conclusion he is here to check up on me. Conclusions have never been my strong point, but my frayed heart can only take so much.

"Hey." I frown at him. All the times I have wished him to appear, yet when he does, I want to cut our meeting short so I don't have to be a casualty to the pain tearing through my sternum. "I'm doing okay," I tell him, keeping my gaze just out of eyeline. It's too much. He doesn't speak, but his brows pull down, and I'm unsure what to do.

"I've got to get home. I'm glad you're okay. You look good." My voice tapers off. Turning quickly, I begin to walk quickly up the path. I'm practically running in my haste to get away from him. I'm not sure why or what has come over me, but I *was* doing okay. I thought I had dealt with the grief of losing him, but I obviously haven't. Blood is rushing through my ears, pounding louder than the rain last night, so loud I don't hear the heavy footsteps behind.

"Za-Lia!" he calls. I crash into the door and try to unlock it, but I'm shaken to the core. I can't cope with the possibility of him popping in and out of my life to check on me, to see him, but for him to never give himself

to me. I'm near sobbing as I manage to get the key in. A big hand connects with my shoulder, twisting me, pulling me until I'm facing him. I slam my hands over my face, not brave enough to look at him.

"I can't do this. Why did you come?" I'm angry. "I was doing okay. I was. Doing. Okay." I sniff and hiccup through my words. I had created a Callan-free bubble. I was doing okay, but okay isn't great or happy. It's just okay. Okay is me living in denial—devoid of true happiness.

"I wasn't," he admits gruffly, fingers prising my hands away, "I wasn't, Zara. I was breaking, angry, hurt. Lost." My wet eyes find his remorseful ones. "You're so beautiful." He smiles. "Look at you." He fingers a blonde curl. "I missed you," he confesses. "Letting you go was the hardest thing I've ever done, Zara."

I shake my head. I don't want to believe him. Not if he is going to leave again.

"I can't do it again," I tell him tearfully.

"You and me both, angel. I meant what I said that night. I love you, Zara. I love how strong you are and how you don't take any shit off me. I love your spirit." He leans and kisses my wet cheek. "I love your smile and sass. I love how fucking beautiful you are. I love you, and I'm here." Wide hands cup my face. "I'm here, and I'm not going." He drops his face into my hairline. "I cried like a damn baby the night I sent you away," he whispers into my hair. His shoulder shudders and I pull back to see his eyes filling up—his earnest confession bringing a guarded look to my face. His jaw works, and I can see he is fighting the emotion choking him.

"I'm sorry, so fucking sorry," he pleads with me to believe him, trust him. He lifts my hands and kisses my palm. "Angel, forgive me. I'm here to stay."

I stare at him, too scared to believe that everything I wished for is transpiring in front of me. I fight back tears and search his face. His words are everything I need to hear, but I'm terrified to accept them. I can't grieve him again. I convey as much in my own stare. Callan's mouth turns down, and he runs his thumb over my mouth. "You can trust me. I won't hurt you again. It was a mistake to let you go. I should have come with you."

"Callan, I can't lose you again."

"I thought I was doing the right thing for you. I promised myself no matter how hard it was, I had to let you go." Wide shoulders shrug, and he

adjusts his stance, bringing himself flush to me. “I thought I had the strength to give you freedom.”

“I didn't feel free. I've been so alone.” I hiccup, burrowing my face in his wide chest and inhaling that familiar scent that gave me so many nights of respite.

“Angel, I'm sorry.” Dipping his head, he takes my lips in a soft kiss. Obsidian eyes, staring deeply into mine.

“I missed you,” I sob, kissing him frantically. The door shifts, and Callan is moving us inside backwards. He breaks away and scoops me up, and I fold myself around him and peck his mouth. “I didn't think I'd ever see you again.” I run my fingers into his hair, then trace his face with my fingertips. Tracing each crease, line, and curve.

“I thought I could let you go.” His light laugh is mocking, but the set of his mouth says more than words ever could. His heart has been hurting as much as mine.

“But you couldn't?” I whisper.

“Too fucking selfish.” He grins, and he lets me run my fingers over his brow and down to float over his lips.

“Good.” I sniff and hold his stare. “You're not going to disappear on me?” I secure his chin in my small hand, ensuring he can't look away.

“The world ending wouldn't keep me from you, Zara,” he vows roughly.

“Right answer.” I close the gap again and press my lips to his lush mouth. His tongue rolls out and tangles with mine. A sudden thought occurs, and I snap back and slap his arm. “What about all those women in the papers!” I glare at him.

He throws his head back and laughs. “It was to throw the paparazzi off your scent. I was seen entering Chloe's after you were taken. They think I'm dodgy as fuck, and they'd be right, but if they thought I had any feelings for you, they'd never believe your death was real. My constant dating ensured your safety,” he tells me.

I scrunch my nose up. A woman a month. I guess old habits die hard.

“Well, my safety sort of thanks your—” I point downward, “penis.” I trail off, hating the thought of him bedding women. I drop my gaze, jealousy blackening my thoughts. Men haven't entered my mind since I arrived. I wriggle free and give him a wary look.

“Zara, Nothing happened. I promise you. I could never do that to you.”

Avoiding eye contact, I tuck my hair behind my ear, put some distance between us, and lean back against the wall. All the emotions I have tried to keep locked tight are racing through my mind, bringing in their wake the reminder of sleepless nights and pained mornings when I would read about him with someone.

“I’d wine and dine them, then have Stalin take them home.” Taking my hand, he brings it to his mouth and kisses my dainty knuckles. “Angel, it’s you, from morning until night, it’s you.” Sincerity is evident in his rasp.

Chewing my lip, I nod. I believe him, but I’ve been so alone. He cups my face and kisses me swiftly. “I’d fake date Stalin if it meant keeping you safe,” he says with conviction, and I giggle.

“I guess, welcome home,” I whisper, biting my lip, and his shoulders drop in relief, the weight of anxiety lifted.

“Good. For a minute, I thought you might send me on my way.”

Smirking, I shake my head and lift to take his mouth.

“The Yovenko’s are dealt with.” He nips and bites my lip and groans. “Isabella is doing well.” He hums, deepening our kiss. “I couldn’t keep away any longer,” he says between kisses.

“She is. Where is she?” I pant.

“After, I’ll tell you after.” He moves through the villa. I know then that he has been here before. Maybe he chose this villa personally—visited prior to my abduction—I don’t care. He is removing my clothes in a rush, and his once-absent mouth is everywhere. “Take this wig off. I feel like I’m fucking cheating on you,” he says, and I laugh. He groans as his teeth clamp around my nipple. My head rolls back. “I want you,” he mutters, tugging on my hair.

“Ouch. Callan! It’s not a wig.” I laugh, biting at his lower lip when he lifts his head in shock. “I dyed it blonde.”

“But I like the black,” he grumbles, and I shrug. “Fine, your eyes,” he says, “I want *your* eyes” He moans, then lowers, rolling his tongue around my nipple and squeezing my breast into a tight mound. “Goddamn sexy woman.”

“Callan, stop. I can’t take the lenses out when you’re doing this.” I giggle.

“I can’t stop. Fuck.” He rips my knickers free and drops, shoving his face into the apex of my thighs and inhaling. “Yes!” he hisses.

“Do you want me to take them... Oh my Gooooooooood,” I cry when his tongue drags through my sex.

I buckle and grip his shoulders. “At least this doesn’t look different,” he growls and thrusts his tongue deep. My laugh is lighter than it has been in months.

“I need you now!” I demand, yanking at his shirt and ripping his belt free. Callan stands and shoves his jeans and boxers down. With a quick grasp, he lifts me, thrusts me back on the bed, and pulls a condom free from his jeans pocket. I frown.

He pants. “Your pill will have run out by now,” he says. It’s true, but I did manage to get to the nearest doctor and request a prescription. I don’t have time to tell him because he is sheathed, rock hard, and positioning himself above me. “Tell me how I let you go.” He grunts, pushing to merge our bodies together.

“I don’t know. You’re stupid.” I moan and match him thrust for thrust. “Verging on cruel.” I narrow my eyes at him.

He pulls out, shudders and slides back in, twisting my features from playful to pleased. “Always so damn tight.” He smirks. “I’ve missed this perfect pussy.” He withdraws and slams deep, his mouth hanging wide as pleasure ripples through him.

“Again.” My hands are everywhere. I writhe and sob as we fuck frantically. It’s been so long, but we both succumb to the pleasure quickly, toppling over into a joint orgasm. Callan presses his face into my neck and kisses his way up until he is swooping his tongue to meet mine.

“I love you, angel,” he whispers.

“I love you.” I smile, cupping his face. “I’m on the pill,” I inform him and giggle when he scowls and drops forward in a huff.

“I fucking hate these things,” he accuses, removing the condom.

“It’s not like you wore it for long,” I retort.

“Fuck off. It’s been months.” He chuckles and rolls, taking me with him. “I’m warming up.” He adjusts my legs so they are in a kneeling position flat to his side. “Give me a few minutes, and I’m going to make love to you all afternoon.”

“Is that right?” I smother a smile and rest my head on his big painted torso. My eyes catch sight of colour in his usually black chest. I push up and zoom in on the pair of moss green, realistic eyes staring back at me. My eyes are on his chest. I stare at them, lift my finger, and trace each eye.

“I missed them,” he says softly. “I missed you.” Those words—they wrap me into a hazy, warm bubble of happiness.

“You're going to make me cry.” I bite my wobbly lip and slowly raise my gaze to meet his. It's still early afternoon, and the bright sun is pouring in through the windows, giving me the perfect lighting to stare at him.

“Then I think that's my cue to love you all afternoon,” Callan murmurs. I nod, letting him roll me beneath him.



We wake late, and the sky is a blanket of twinkling stars. I'm sore and sated and so happy he is here. Part of me doesn't quite believe it, and I find myself just touching him to remind myself this isn't a dream.

“I'm not going anywhere.” He laughs.

“Just checking.” I grin. I've made us a picnic for dinner, but with Callan in attendance, it's more of a buffet. We sit out on the decking and pick. Even though I have plenty of chairs, I have made myself comfy in his lap. “Tell me about Isabella. How is she?” All those years, I feared being caught by those men, and she endured them daily. I have no idea how a woman copes with that. It had plagued me for weeks; the only relief I had was knowing that Callan had her home.

“Slow and steady. She's closed off and reluctant to open up. Not that I want to know details, but Stalin seems to be better at helping her. I'm too aggressive in my approach, apparently.”

“You don't say.” I chuckle. He pinches my side, and I rest my head on his shoulder. “She gets along with Stalin then?” I ask, biting into a strawberry.

“Yeah,” he scoffs, “they will be here tomorrow,” he announces happily.

“Really? I don't think Stalin likes me.” I'm stiff in his lap.

“He'd better. He knows what you mean to me,” he mutters, biting a chunk of bread off and chewing thoughtfully.

“I guess enough time has passed. Hopefully, we can all move forward.”

“There will be no going back now. Come here.” He twists me and lands a deep kiss on my mouth. “I do want to ask you something?” He is grave, and I twist my head, waiting for him to get serious with me.

“Okay.” His tone leaves me feeling nervous.

“Earlier, I watched you with that girl.” His thumb rubs back and forth over my cheek. I've removed my lenses, and he is much happier—me too,

for that matter.

“Thalia.” I smile fondly. “She’s a cutie.”

“Do you want children? We never discussed it before.” Nothing in his face suggests he doesn’t, and his soft questioning worries me. I chew my inner cheek and debate about whether to say what I really want. “You do, don’t you?” His rough voice lowers. Hand lifting my chin, he reconnects our eyes. Will my truth cost us our future? I’m sick to my stomach at the thought, but lying will serve us no purpose.

With a pained look, I shake my head. “The opposite. No, I don’t want children, not after everything I’ve seen, dealt with, and when I think of Isabella,” I shudder. “I just can’t bring a child into this world. Not when I know of its sickness.” My confession is met by silence; his dark stare holds mine emotionally. “I’m sorry if you feel differently.” I apologise, anxious I’ve tipped our new life on its axis.

Callan smiles warmly at me, bringing love into his usually dark features. “I don’t,” he admits finally. “Seeing you earlier, I was worried you did.” I shake my head. His shoulders sag in relief. “I get you all to myself, then. Good.” His mouth skims mine.

“Just me and you.” I grin.

“Well, plus Isabella and Stalin.” He laughs, and I do too. I’m happy to be gaining more people: my own family unit. A real family for once.

“Oscar isn’t doing well,” I whisper, knowing this is no doubt a sore subject for him anyway.

“Oscar is fucking lucky I didn’t bleed him dry for selling you out,” he snaps. “He is a user. I told you this before.” His mouth turns down in disgust for my friend. “Look, he may have played the doting friend, but before you and I crossed paths, he would discuss you openly in Skyn. Everyone knew he was your friend, and he used it to gain favour. I’m sure even some of it hit the press.”

I pull back, shocked. I picture how he was with me. I don’t believe him to be as two-faced as Callan is professing. I only ever discussed him with pride.

“Hey, don’t dwell. It’s the past. I’m here now. This is all that matters. You, me, and our little island hideaway, our future.” He reminds me with conviction. Flicking eyes across my face, he shakes his head. “Kiss me.”

Two words, one demand, and I lean in, pressing soft lips to his. It’s swift and sweet, just what I needed to chase the disconcerting mood away. No

matter what, I can't lift the sense of guilt at duping Oscar into believing and grieving my death.

"Maybe, but he is in a mess now. It doesn't sit well with me," I whisper.

"You forgive him?" he asks incredulously. "You could have died!"

"I know, but I don't want him to kill himself because he thinks I'm dead, and I'm not." I frown at his big chest.

"You are, though, beautiful. Zara is gone. Your life is with me now. Oscar would have always given into those vices. It was only a matter of time before he did. You're not to blame," he tells me softly. I bite my lip, unsure whether what he believes is true. I guess I will never know. I do know I can never contact Oscar, not after he sold me out. I can't trust him, not now, but I still love him.

"Can I ask you something?" It's my turn now.

"Sure."

"What is it you do, or did?" I never found out. He was always so secretive. Other than overhearing the odd conversation, Callan never admitted outright what he was involved in. I want the truth, even old truths, so we can move forward.

"Is it worth knowing when it's in the past?" He frowns down at me, his deft finger running along the seam of my bikini top peeking out from my beach cover-up.

"Yes." I nod. I want to know him, all of him.

"Well, the clubs were a front. They were legitimate, but Skyn was set up as a way to gain access to tap into the black market. I'd listen in to clients discussing deals, shipments, arms dealers, corrupt politicians, bad cops, bad lawyers, government officials, drug deals, and trafficking. It's how I know Oscar discussed you, but mainly it was my window into that world. I intercepted trafficking shipments with the hope someone would have had contact with my mother, with Isabella, but each rescue was futile." He tucks my hair behind my ear and runs his thumb down my cheek. "I knew in my gut it was them, though, the Yovenkos. They were at large in London when I was a teen. I'd heard their name time and time again, and we all knew what shit they were involved with. Girls were disappearing all over the shop, and nameless, homeless girls kept vanishing. I knew your father was onto something. They would never have killed him if he hadn't had something to hold against them."

“What about your mother?” We’d never discussed her before he sent me away. Everything between being at Chloe’s to him sending me away had become a gigantic blur. I thought about it a lot and how he said the only people he loved were taken from him. If it was when he was a teen, how long was his family held by them and used as currency for the sick pleasure of other vile men?

“She died. Isabella said she overdosed years ago.” He seems so detached from it all.

“I’m sorry.” I kiss his cheek.

“Honestly, I’d rather she die than live like that. I’m glad I got Isabella out.” He affirms.

“I know bu—”

“Things were complicated with my mother before they were taken. I never respected her, or the life she led, or the life she gave Isabella and me.”

“In what way. I don’t understand?”

His laugh is short and distasteful. “She was a prostitute. Isabella and I don’t know who our fathers are. Honestly, I don’t want to know. We roamed around a brothel, playing tag whilst she worked.” I shudder internally at the thought. His tone suggests he is happier she is dead. I want to hold him close and rid his demons, but Callan would hate my pity.

“She’s still your mum.”

“And she’s safer being where she is,” Callan mutters and clears his throat. I can sense he doesn’t want to talk about her.

I offer him a sad smile. “You said Oscar used cocaine, how... I mean, how did he get it?” I query.

“It’s how I made most of my money. I was, until recently, London’s biggest drug dealer. I was shifting hundreds of thousands of pounds of coke and pills weekly. It gave me unprecedented access to London’s underworld, contacts, and insight. Oscar would package drop for me.”

“A drug dealer?” I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. This is new information. Knowing how far he went to save Isabella, how he helped all those women, I had him pegged as a hero. Despite all his wrongdoings, at heart, he is a good guy. It saddens me that he had to become this person to save his family. “Do you use?” I question, feeling heavy at heart.

“No, never.” He cups my face. “Hey, trust me when I say I would never touch it, ever. I exert control over all areas of my life, Zara, like drink, I don’t touch drugs.” I nod. I trust him and believe him, but this is all a lot to

take in. I shift, getting extra comfy on this lap. A drug dealer, this is mind-boggling.

“So, he knew what was in the packages, then? Oscar, I mean?” I must sound so naïve, but Oscar was adamant he had no idea what jobs he was doing for Callan.

“Of course, he was on my payroll.” Callan scoffs. I shake my head. Wow, another lie he fed me that I ate up. I really had no idea who my friend was. Is. And he didn’t know me either.

“How do you even get into something like that, Callan? So many families will be affected by those drugs, people addicted,” I say quietly. I eye Callan and look away. My career gave me so many opportunities, and being involved in charities was one.

“I’m not proud. I did it to save my family, and I don’t regret it. I was too late to save my mother. At the time, I didn’t care what effect it had on those families. I just wanted mine to be okay,” he admits gruffly.

“I know.” I smile sadly, thinking of the homeless and charities I have supported to raise money for recovering addicts. All these years, we were connected without even knowing it. Whilst he was infecting the streets for personal gain, I was trying to heal it in any way I could. Being homeless at twelve gave me an insight into street life that the most privileged of people will never know or endure. To think that because of the Yovenkos’ greed and behaviour, it set a chain of events in motion—events that led me to this man.

“They are adults. They can choose to say no. My sister and mother were ripped from me, unwillingly, painfully, to endure God knows what. Isabella barely likes being touched. She was probably rap...” He can’t even say it. My smile is sad. “If ruining a few families along the way ensured my sister’s safety, then so be it. I never professed to be a good guy,” he tells me fiercely.

I bite my lip, hating that I’ve upset him. That was never my intention. I’m trying to get my head around all of this.

“I know. It’s just a lot to take in.” I cup his cheek. “You are, though, a good guy. To me, you always were. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Angel, I’m not upset. Life dealt me a cruel card, and I set fire to the pack.”

“It’s crazy to think overnight you became this person, all because of what the Russians did.”

“Men like me aren’t made overnight. I went to sleep with my sister’s laughter in my mind and woke to her screams rupturing my ears. I was shot and left for dead.” My brows shoot up, and Callan taps his finger to a place on his throat, just below his jawline. Below the black ink is the faint dip of a scar. “I passed out amongst the blood and chaos and woke in hospital. Fourteen, terrified, and full of vengeance, but it took years to establish myself. I had to manipulate men bigger and more feared than I was back then—gamble my life with others.”

“It sounds awful.” Lifting his big hand, I drop my cheek in it and look sympathetically at him. I know that fear, those gambles. The streets had given me more skills to negotiate my way through life than modelling ever did.

“Two sides of the same coin.” He winks lovingly, “No matter how tarnished or polished I am, without you, I’m worthless, angel.”

“Two sides. Same coin,” I whisper. Running my thumb along the neat scar at his throat, I read the words out. “Death by my own hands.” I get it now. His death is his to choose. Not for another to take. He fought to stay alive to save his family, to avenge them. Now it’s his time to live. For him. For us. I hope what bad still festers in the world gives Callan and me the peace we deserve.

“It’s done now. That’s not my life anymore. You are. Me and you, beautiful.” His fingers run through my long, blonde hair. I sigh, knowing I can’t change the past. This is our future, and we need to focus on that. Knowing what I do about his past and the destruction the Yovenkos have caused along the way, I wonder if we can do anything to raise awareness. Maybe I can sell my jewellery and gift the money to charity?

“It needs cutting,” I say, wrinkling my nose.

“It’s nice, leave it.” He dips for a kiss, and I give in, sweeping my tongue and holding him fast.

Chapter Thirty-One

“That night, the night I came into Skyn, you were so angry,” I recall. “Why?” He smirks, privy to information I’m not. “Tell me,” I ask eagerly.

“I knew who you were, of course. I keep a close eye on all my staff. Oscar being as close to you as he was, gave me a small insight into your life, and although I thought you were very beautiful, I never allowed myself to stray from finding my family, but coming face to face with you at Skyn, I wasn’t prepared.” He chuckles. “I saw you on the cameras, and I was livid with Oscar, with you, for coming into my club. You could have damaged all the work I had done. I could envision it unravelling because of one person, you.” He smirks knowingly at me. “You had entered my world, and I was prepared to punish you for it, but you turned around, and fuck me, Zara, I was sucker-punched. Someone could have put a bullet in my gut, and it wouldn’t have hurt me as much.” His breath goes ragged. “It only magnified that anger. I was pissed that I was so attracted to you. I told myself you were superficial and no doubt a snob.”

My eyebrows rise in amusement, and he grins. “But you stood up to me, held my stare, dared me to challenge you back. I wanted you then. I kept thinking how much I wanted to kiss you—what would these lips feel like.” He runs his finger over them. “How would you taste? Would you dissolve on my tongue, lose that poise and edge you were renowned for? I was surprised to find you looked so empty. Looked as empty as I felt.” His smile turns sad, and mine reciprocates. No one could ever understand our pain, not unless they’d lived it. “It was like looking at myself. I despised myself at that moment but also, I couldn’t look away.”

I shudder out a breath and drop my face into his shoulder. “I thought I was scared of you, but it was how I felt around you that scared me.” I kiss his neck and peck my way up until I’m at his mouth. “I told myself I hated you for what you did to Oscar, but when I found you in my home, I was the calmest I have been in years. No more fear. It left when you were around.

And without it ruling my heart, I was able to feel. I never wanted you to leave. Each night I would come home and wish to find you there. Waiting for me. I hated those nights without you. I'd relieve any moments with you because there was a connection. Wasn't there?"

"There *is* a connection, and now you know what a worm Oscar is, I don't feel bad admitting that after seeing you for the first time, seeing your vulnerability through your strength, he deserved that beating alone for selling you out to customers for his own gain. I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

I shake my head. "Such a thug," I muse, making him smirk. "I love you." I bite my lip and smile at him before leaning in for a kiss. "Thank you for coming back to me."

"Always, angel." Those big spade hands cup my face, and I melt into him. Calm. Safe. Loved.

"Take me to bed."

"On one condition." He chuckles, ducking out of the way of my kiss. "We never talk about the past. From here on out, we are Cal and Lia." I wrinkle my nose. "Zara, you have to let go of the past. I like Lia," he confesses. "You can stay Roem or Scott—preferably the latter." He grins wolfishly, and my thighs tense with need. I gawp at him.

Scott! Definitely Scott!

"But we start afresh now, as new people with a new life. We let go of it all," Callan reiterates.

I nod. "Yes," I agree, "no more past. Just us and the future."

"Good, now kiss me."

I lean right in and stop a breath short from his mouth.

"Scott," I whisper slowly, raising my eyes to meet his. "I'm yours. I'm a Scott," I tell him.



It's mid-morning when the sound of footsteps ascending the sandy steps from the beach stops me talking mid-sentence. Stalin's large body comes into view, and beside him, Isabella's dainty frame. Her small hand is held in his as he assists her in navigating the dusty path. I stand quickly and smile at them, but when I twist to Callan, he is grimacing at Stalin, handling his sister with ease.

"Hi!" I'm excited and so happy to have them here that I never considered Callan's hurt at not being able to connect with his sister. "Callan

has been telling me how great it is to have his sister home.”

Isabella’s gaze shoots up from the floor, and her cheeks flush. There is an obvious tension between them. I flick a look to Callan to find him clenching his fists and frowning out at the sea.

“We’re so glad you came out. I am really happy you’re both here,” I exclaim. Stalin nods at me and lifts his chin at Callan in greeting. “Drink?” I ask, trying to lift the fog of awkwardness.

“Please,” Isabella exhales a worn-out breath, “that’s some climb.”

“Be right back.” I whip off but stop and watch as Callan stands and approaches his sister. She fixes a smile to her mouth for him, but I can see the shame on her face at how Callan views her with pity. I frown, chewing my lip. Does he even realise he is doing that? He pecks her cheek and rubs her back, but she soon returns to Stalin’s side, where he pulls a chair out for her, telling her how unfit she is, which makes her laugh. His ease and calmness around her brings a smile to my face. He likes her. They both settle into a soft conversation, and Callan stomps my way as I race off and feign being busy.

“Everything okay?” I say when hands slip around my waist. He murmurs an inaudible response as his chin drops to my shoulder. “You know if all you see when you look at her is pain, she will never be able to forget it,” I say it whisper-soft, but the words hit like a freight train. Stiffening, he tightens his hold around my waist.

“I can’t help thinking about what she went through.”

“I know, but whilst you keep looking at her with all this torture in your eyes, you’re not allowing her to move on. You pity her, and it brings her shame,” I tell him gently. I twist, hooking my arms around his neck, grimacing at him.

“Fuck. I didn’t even think that. I thought she just found me too intense.”

“Well, that too. You’re about as subtle as a sledgehammer.” I chuckle.

“What if she never talks about it? I don’t want her to suffer in silence. She hasn’t said a word to me.”

“To you,” I point out, “it doesn’t mean she hasn’t been talking.”

“Stalin hasn’t said a word.” He defends, taking over pouring the drinks. I drop my hands to the counter.

“And he won’t. Have you seen how he looks at her? He’s fighting her demons like you did mine. She just wants her brother. Nothing more,” I say quietly.

“I swear if he has even touched her, after all she has been through,” he growls.

I shake my head. “Callan, she’s not a little girl anymore. She is a woman who has been through hell—she deserves to be loved, properly loved. Would you want it to be anyone else?”

He grumbles, “No.”

“She seems happier. Last time I saw her, she was just a void,” I comment. “Anyway, something tells me Stalin is a big softy like you.”

“There’s nothing soft about me.” He jolts his hips forward.

“Really? A bird once told me you cried like a baby over losing your love.” My lips twist, and I yelp when he bites my neck.

“Did you not cry for me?” Having placed the glasses down, he cups my throat. “How many tears did you shed?” he hums. “As many as when I make you come undone?”

“Years worth.” I swallow against his gentle palm. “It broke me, Callan. I don’t want to talk about it.” I frown. “It’s nothing to how it feels having you here.”

“Good. Now tell me you love me, so I can go out there and try to be a better brother.”

“I love you.” I laugh.

“Now tell me you’re all mine, so I can learn to be a good husband.”

“Husband? When did you propose?” I laugh, twisting to look up at him to find he is watching me with a smile in his eyes.

“I didn’t, but now that I can see how hopeful you are, I know it’s something you want just as much as me.” He pecks my lips and begins walking backwards. “Cal and Lia Scott.” He tilts his head thoughtfully, satisfied. “I’m going to marry you down on the beach with sand in your hair and salt in our lungs.”

“Is that your proposal?” I laugh, crossing my arms over my chest.

“I’ve never been overly traditional, so I don’t intend to propose. Would me getting down on one knee and asking make my love for you any more meaningful?” His lips twitch with a smirk, but he doesn’t unleash it fully.

I shake my head. No, it wouldn’t. I don’t need to be asked. I don’t need to see him on his knees. I don’t even need a ring or the paper to prove anything as chemical as what we have. Both physically and mentally, we fused at some point, and nothing could ever diminish that, no matter what. We have never been conventional, and starting now would mock who we are.

“It’s perfectly imperfect.” He is perfectly imperfect.

“Only you.” He sighs heavily, a perplexed but satisfied look on his handsome face.

“Only me what?”

“Only you could ever give me exactly what I need, when I had no idea I needed it.”

“Well, I *need* to be a Scott, so you better get to work on that.” I wink before I grab up the glasses and sashay towards him. He is grinning like mad, watching me with hungry eyes as I peck his cheek. “Pronto,” I whisper, and leave him standing in the villa. Stalin and Isabella are both chatting quietly when I meet them outside. “Here you go. It’s just infused water.”

“Thanks.” Isabella speaks first, but Stalin stands to take the glasses and offers her one before returning to his seat.

“Anyone fancy a walk into town, or maybe we can hit the beach? I still need to grab some things off the boat,” Callan says, joining us.

“The beach, but I just got up here!” Isabella exclaims and droops in her chair.

“It’s an easy walk down,” I tell her, “plus, it’s not too bad today. I’ve not been down there for a little while. It would be nice to enjoy it with someone.” I look at her hopefully. “We can take a walk into town though, if you prefer?”

“Do you mind? My legs are like jelly still.” She blushes, and we all laugh.

“No, that’s fine. Once you’ve hydrated and had a rest, we can take a walk down into the village, and these two can go to the beach.”

“That suits me,” Stalin adds, taking a sip of his water then encouraging Isabella to drink.

“Yeah, sure,” Callan mutters.

Isabella looks at him quizzically. “I’m not going to steal her away,” she jokes.

“I know, but I just got her back. I don’t much fancy letting her go for a while.”

“We’ll be an hour tops,” I tell him, secretly happy he is irritated about us being separated for a short time. “Besides, it will be nice to have some girl time,” I admit. Isabella smiles at me, and Callan relaxes, seeing how cheerful his sister is.

“Okay, we can have lunch when you get back,” Callan replies. It’s the perfect excuse for Isabella and me to get to know each other. After I sort my lenses out, we head down into the town, and I show her around a little. It’s fairly quiet, and not many people take much notice of us. We browse a few stalls and pick some food for lunch. She even asks about coming into town again for coffee, and I take it as a good sign.

“That would be great. There isn’t much going on. It’s the calmest place on earth, well for me it is, anyway.” I laugh. “I’ll have to show you my jewellery when we get back. I’ve been making some to keep busy,” I say brightly. I’m super proud of myself, and it shows in my voice.

“Really, wow, I’d love that. You seem so accomplished and well-travelled. I don’t even know if I have any talents,” she admits doubtfully.

“What do you mean?” I ask as we make our way back to the villa.

“I’ve been gone for so long. I was never given an opportunity to even try to learn anything. I wouldn’t know where to start.” I’m engulfed in guilt. How could I even forget how deprived she has been? I feel awful and really stupid for pressing further.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think.” I flush with embarrassment.

“Don’t be silly.” She laughs. “But I would like to get a hobby or learn a trade, anything. I don’t even know if I can ride a bike anymore.” She shakes her head with a weird laugh.

“We can get you a bike.” I grin. “I will help you. This track is perfect, as it’s long and wide,” I offer, “and anything you want to try, just let Callan or Stalin know, and they will get it for you, I’m sure.”

“They would go overboard with it, though. Can we just keep this between us, just for now?” she asks softly.

I nod. “Sure.”

The villa is quiet, and after waiting for over an hour for the men to appear again, we decided to head on down to the beach.

“I take it you got fed up of putting that wig on and off?” she asks me as I brush my hair.

“It was such a pain.” I laugh. I’ve put on white trousers and a loose cream silk camisole, and I grab my favourite jumper before we leave. Isabella is wearing wide-leg jeans and a button-up blouse.

“I really like that outfit,” I say as we trudge down the steps, towels in hand.

“Really? I don’t look too skinny?”

“You’ve put weight on since I last saw you. You look good, healthy.” I keep my tone light and skim over the fact that she is still suffering physically with all that has happened.

“I feel good,” she admits on a deep inhale, “I’m getting there.”

“Good. You deserve to be happy.” We share a smile and kick off our flip-flops as we make our way over to the boat. It’s not until we round the boat and come to the small jetty that I stop and gasp softly.

“Oh, wow.” Isabella breathes. “Oh god.” She tears up, blinking between me to her brother standing at the end of the jetty where he and Stalin have somehow decorated the wooden dock. The sand-covered jetty is decoratively lined with shells, paving the way for an aisle. I choke out a sniff and look down at myself and then at her in a panic. She quickly drops her things and fluffs my hair around my shoulders. “You look stunning,” she assures me.

Both men are stood waiting at the end. I’m surprised with their bulking weight they haven’t caused the rotting jetty to sink into the ocean. I wouldn’t care. I would still wade into the water to marry this man. Callan is wearing an open-neck white shirt and jeans. His feet are bare. He looks so handsome and nothing like a burly club owner. He looks calm, free. I don’t even hesitate. I move, eager to close the gap between us, but stop, looking at Isabella and lifting my elbow with a blush.

“Walk me down?” I ask, tears turning my lashes to inky spikes. She nods and hooks her arm with mine.

We begin down the wooden path, crossing from sand to sea, and each step brings me closer to him. I’m shaking with excitement. Isabella passes me from her arm to Callan’s, and his chest expands, his jaw going taut. His eyes glaze, and I blink up at him happily.

“Is this even legal?” I whisper hopefully. Callan chews his lips and flicks a look to his friend, who looks less than pleased, as he throws Callan a miffed stare.

“I was ordained before we left London,” Stalin grates out, embarrassed. I press my lips together and flick an amused look at Callan. “Don’t,” Stalin warns, seeing how hard we are restraining our laughs. “If I didn’t love you both, I’d feel a twat right now,” he mutters, and Callan clips him around the back of the head. “Sorry.” He looks at me apologetically.

“You still look a twat.” Callan grins. “Now marry me to my girl,” he insists, taking my hand and bringing it to his lips.

Stalin begins our ceremony; he keeps it simple and sweet, addressing us both in a calm and proud tone. We repeat our vows, pleading love and fidelity to one another. Promising a life of honesty and support. Swearing to protect one another with everything we have. The sea rolls and waves crash gently into the wooden pier. I couldn't think of a more perfect way to become joined to this man.

After I have repeated my last vow and before Stalin can say more, Callan speaks.

"I thank you for bringing me back from merely existing. For loving me in my darkness," he says, voice thick with emotion. He shifts ever so slightly, trying to disguise how overwhelmed he is. My beast of a man is all choked up, and I could weep with happiness.

A tear slips free from my eyes, and he quickly wipes it away with this thumb.

"And I thank you for helping me to escape the light." I swallow loudly. Callan puts my hand over his heart and it bangs against my palm. I smile tearfully as he looks to Stalin eagerly, who is subduing his own emotions.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride," he says gruffly, pulling a crying Isabella to his side.

Callan draws me in for a sweet and passionate kiss. His big hands envelop my face, reminding of the safety he brings. The protection. The love. I grip his shirt and hold tight, expressing that I will never let him go. Not now, not ever.

"I love you," I say between kisses, blissful. I never thought for a minute I would ever be this happy, or be this close to another person, or share in their joy. But here he is. Big and beautiful, strong and passionate. Mine.

"From now until always. I'm yours, angel," he whispers in my ear.

The End

Epilogue

Callan

Death by my own hands. I read the words etched into my neck as the razor blade glides through the shaving foam. With each movement, the cream disappears, showcasing the intricate lines inked into my body. I still believe those words with every ounce of my dark being. My gaze adjusts, dipping further to where my angel's eyes stare back at me from my chest. My shoulders rise, my chest expanding with emotion.

They say eyes are windows to the soul.

I've seen enough devoid gazes to know this to be true. I also know broken souls reach for tortured minds. It's how my angel knows safety with me. We are one and the same. Tortured. Broken by the cruelty of others and by our own mistakes. Broken enough to no longer want to fix it with those cracked pieces, but to replace it with the fallen shards of each other. I want to fuse her broken parts to me and heal them before I return them to her and watch her flourish. She can only do that if I give her freedom.

"You've got that look." Zara smiles, stepping into the bathroom and coming to wrap her arms around my waist. My gun presses into my side, and her small hands sweep up my front, momentarily covering her eyes painted on my chest. She may be Lia to the town residents and on paper, but she is Zara to me. The beautiful model who came to me for help.

"And what look would that be?" I reply, tilting my chin to give myself more access to my neck.

"Like something is bugging you, what's up?"

I finish shaving and swill the razor in the water and pat my face clean.

"Are you happy here?" I ask, cleaning the sink as the water and hair are sucked down the drain.

"Yes." Her voice is cautious, and when I chance a look up, she is staring at me through the mirror. "What's going on?" she whispers.

That right there is fear. I can smell it a mile off and sense it with my own eyes closed. Even after a year of having me here by her side, fear controls her. She's lived it so long that she no longer knows how to exist without it. It may only be subtle, and she is nothing like the woman I first met, but she can only thrive so much in this environment.

"Nothing, I was just asking."

"You don't ask anything without having a reason. Cal, talk to me?"

"We are talking." I grin and dip for a quick kiss.

"Why would you ask that? You know I'm happy? You're here." She hops up onto the side and sidles until she is in front of me, her legs on either side of my waist. "I know something has happened."

"It hasn't," I reassure her.

"It's going to," she retorts, lifting a perfect brow. "I'm going to worry now." She purses her lips, and I press my mouth firmly to hers until her pout smoothes out and the frown on her forehead decreases.

"Well, don't. You know I'd never let any harm come to you." I secure her hips in my hands and lift her off the vanity, taking her with me through the villa. I duck us through an arch into our bedroom and lie her down. Fingertips dance over my lips and nip them, sucking a digit into my mouth. I bite it in place and quirk a brow.

"Can I have my finger back?"

"Are you going to stop stressing?" I mumble around said finger.

She's thinking about it. "Are you going to tell me what's really going on?"

I open my jaw, letting her finger go, and her arm drops away.

"No, I'm going to show you." I stand fluidly and smirk down at her, glaring at me from the bed grumpily. I slap her arse. "Get ready, angel, and don't bother with the lenses," I deliver before sauntering out, leaving her looking surprised in the bedroom.

I decide to wait out in the car, knowing that Zara will take forever getting ready if she can keep asking me questions. This way, the quicker she gets ready, the quicker she will get in the car. It's another twenty minutes before she appears, and as she does, Stalin drives down the dusty road towards us. Unlike my angel, he knows what's going on, and I wanted him to check on Isabella whilst we are out for the day.

"I take it you're in on this, too?" Zara questions Stalin as he eases free from the car.

“I just came to say hi. Are you going out?” Stalin frowns, and Zara tuts, not in the least duped by him.

“Your girlfriend is out back.” Zara smirks, and my eyes narrow on Stalin, who holds up his hands.

“Not my girlfriend,” he states, shaking his head in despair at my prickly wife.

“Which angry bear are you trying to poke?” I question as she hops up into the vehicle. Although I said no lenses, Zara has donned large sunglasses.

“Whichever bites first.” Her pissed off tone makes me grin deeply. Her lips twitch, and I know then she is goading a reaction out of me. She thinks if she plays the upset wife, I will tell her.

“Something the matter?”

“I don't know, Callan, is there?” She snaps around and tilts her head. With her big glasses, she looks like a fly.

“Those glasses are ridiculous.”

“And so is my husband, for telling me not to wear a disguise. This is dangerous, Cal.”

I turn and grip her chin, pulling her to me. “Would I ever put you in harm's way? *Ever?*” My voice is angrier than I intend on it being, and Zara cups my cheek and bites her lip. “Trust me, angel. Where we are going, you can be yourself.”

She stares at me through the stupidly large glasses, and I yank them off and hold her gaze. We stare it out for a moment, and her rapidly beating heart slows. She's nervous, and that wasn't the emotion I was aiming for. I want to surprise her, not put the fear of God into her. I hold her gaze, and my own heartbeat slows to a sated beat. Silence pours through the car, and I allow her to feed off my emotion. It takes a few minutes, but Zara relaxes in the seat.

“Okay,” she finally says, resigned. Calmer.

“Good.” I peck her naturally pouty lips.

It's a thirty-minute drive before I guide the car up an incline and head towards a building in the distance.

“Oh, wow.” Zara points ahead. “Look at that. Is it a castle?” she wonders.

“It's a monastery,” I inform her.

“Do you think they do tours?” she asks, expecting us to pass it by, but as we near, I flick the indicator and turn the car along the dusty road leading up to the old building behind a wall entry.

“Let’s find out?” I grin.

“Cal, we can’t just knock on the gates and ask to have a snoop around.” She laughs. “We can come back another time. Where are you taking me, anyway?” she murmurs, checking her reflection in the mirror.

“Here,” I finally admit.

Her face twists to meet mine.

“Why?” She looks up at the high walls and frowns. “What’s in there?”

“Freedom,” I murmur. My response has her forehead furrowing, and I lean to touch it. “Beyond these walls is freedom, angel.” I pick up her hand and kiss her fingertips. “Stay here and stop frowning.”

I jump out and unlock the gates. It needs modernising, that's for sure. Nothing Stalin and I can’t arrange. Zara is gawping at the large building through the now-open gate. I grin and get back in, driving us inside, and I park up outside the large entrance. Behind the wall is an array of buildings: barns, guest quarters, and a chapel.

“Out you get.” I wink and pull her glasses off before I step outside. Zara stays put and looks to see if anyone is about. “It’s just us. It’s been empty for years. Welcome to your new home.” I grin.

The door swings open, and Zara rushes out.

“Home? Wait. You bought it? What the hell, Callan!” She laughs.

“Yes, this way you can walk around and not fear anyone is going to see you. You have an entire estate to enjoy at your leisure without the worry of anyone turning up uninvited. Besides, the villa was giving me a stiff neck.”

“Cal... I can’t.” Her lip wobbles. “I can’t believe you’ve done this?”

“Angel, I’d buy the world for you. Want to look around?” I hold out my hand, and she glides over, giddy eyes brimming with tears.

“It’s stunning. What about the villa?”

“We can keep it and use it to enjoy the beach on weekends. We’re more inland here,” I say, wrapping her plait around my wrist and winking at her. I place my fingers in my mouth, whistling, and it echoes through the complex. “Besides, I think your moans will sound extraordinary in here.”

She slaps my chest.

“This is a house of God,” she admonishes in a hushed tone.

“And I already thank him for the acoustics my wife will bless me with.” I laugh deeply.

Her laugh makes my cock twitch, and then she is kissing me again. I grunt as she sweeps her tongue in and pushes into me to gain more height.

“There is so much room,” she pulls away breathless, “what are we going to do with all this space?” She laughs happily. “I love it.”

“Good, let me show you around.” I take her hand and walk her through the buildings, giving her a thorough tour. We make plans as we move around. Her ecstatically announcing if it will be a living room or where we will have a dining room.

“What about Bella?” Zara murmurs, walking up a set of stairs. This isn’t the correct stairway to enter the main bedroom, but it offers an incredible view over the orchard.

“She wants her own place.”

“Oh, she never said.” Zara looks back at me. “Oh, wow.”

Her gaze falls to the view out the window.

I laugh inwardly at her inability to focus on any one thing with how excited she is.

“I’ll miss her and Stalin,” Zara says softly, staring out at the view.

“They can visit whenever they like.”

“I know.” She pecks my lips and carries on up the stairs and along the stone hall until I manoeuvre her into a large room.

“This will be our bedroom.” I cup her stomach and kiss her neck. If those from my previous life could see me now, they would weep with laughter: an ex drug kingpin who lives in a monastery, not to mention the sins of Skyn. It’s comical. I was more than ready to hand it over to Tony. I never planned to live that life forever, and even as I scarred the world with my sins to fight for my family, I made all the necessary arrangements to be able to walk away, financially secure and without complaint. Tony now rules what was my empire. Skyn and the drugs are his, but I’m still a silent partner in Nexo and Hex.

I know not to cut all ties. One day, I may need to put my foot back in that door. Tony knows how this works, and after everything I have done for him, all the years by my side, I know he will welcome me back into the fold with willing arms.

Zara sighs happily, and I lift her chin and tilt her mouth to mine, kissing her deeply. She hums and cups my face, opening her mouth for my tongue

to penetrate.

In retrospect, it seems only fitting that we live here. It would go to ruins, but now it can become a home.

A place for us to grow roots.

A way to cleanse us of our pasts.

A place for me to thank whichever higher being gifted me with this beautiful creature. Whoever gave me an angel to break through my darkness.

Do I think this place will bring me absolution? Perhaps not.

But I want to atone for any wrongs, and I know she is the only one to give it to me.

Here we are both free. We can embrace the life we both had torn from us.

Here I can become the man she needs me to be.

I flatten her to the wall and tilt her chin, ensuring she looks at me.

“I love you, angel.”

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Dear Reader

I never had any intention of writing this story. It hadn't been in the back of my mind or something I had jotted down. I imagined these characters on the spur of the moment to purely fill a gap in another book. A gap that grew and grew until their story had more than a skeleton. It had a voice and wanted to be heard, and I'm so glad it did.

Thank you for your continued support and for reading all the words.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm never quite sure where to start this or how to put into words my gratitude because simply, sometimes words don't feel enough, and yet they can mean everything.

It's been less than a year since I started this journey, and I've made such amazing friends along the way: both readers and authors. To the Ronas and Lizzie, I couldn't do this without your support, and seeing each of you flourish on your own journey is incredible!

A special thanks to my betas for your advice, input and time. I can't thank you enough for allowing me to share my words with you, for your brutal honesty and continued support. Seeing your comments and love for my words keeps me going!

My editor, Claire, who helps shape my babies into something publish worthy. Thank you!

A huge thank you to Katie, my proofreader, and my everything else when I haven't a clue what I'm doing, which we both know is more often than not!

TL Swan, your insight and selflessness with us newbies is something I will cherish always. I appreciate you and your words.

To my readers who are still riding this wave with me, I keep waiting for a haha fooled you moment, but, nope, you're still here, and I bloody love you for it.

Kirsty, at The Pretty Little Design Co. for my stunning cover, I had a particular vision in mind, and you gave it life. It's going to look stunning on my bookshelf and everyone else's.

To forgetyounot.designs, I'm so glad you decided to share your work. I love my gorgeous graphics. People, if you haven't already, then go check this page out!

Book Obsessed formatting for making the inside of my book as pretty as the outside.

To the bloggers and everyone else in between and after that, you breathe extra life into my words with your incredible edits and reviews!

And lastly, thank you to the universe for sinful men and strong women.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. R. Thomas is an Author from England who writes contemporary romance with an edge. After being an avid reader and soon she realised she needed more than to be on the receiving end of a good book, she wanted to deliver one. What started as a hobby soon became an obsession, and as they say the rest is history.

She has a weakness for alpha males, edgy romance and loves a good twist.

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A. R. Thomas lives with her son, and when she's not supporting him from the sidelines at his latest sporting event, she is usually, lost to the thought of a book.

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