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*It’s crazy to realize this all will end where it began. Perhaps I should have realized, the evil of Carnival de Morte could never die. Beneath the excitement and darkness is a burial of bones, and even if I didn’t want it to, the show must go on.*

# 𝕮𝖍𝖆𝖕𝖙𝖊𝖗 𝕺𝖓𝖊

## Vivianna

The world changes before my eyes.

My world infinitely twisting, crashing, and rising again. The desperate need to reach for a shred of control, yet knowing I no longer have any.

There is a part of me which feels panicked, not knowing what may happen, worried the things I cannot control will somehow damage my already fractured wings.

I couldn’t control the burning fire or the death of my mother. I couldn’t control Alastor’s horrifying drug use. For the life of me, I couldn’t control the weight of the man bearing down onto my back as I inhaled the earth and tore my insides to shreds.

I couldn’t control the hands of Princeton as he bruised my skin.

Though, even with all the things I’m unable to control, there is something about releasing it all that feels freeing.

To finally just… *let go.*

“You’re home.” Hades’s hand goes onto my thigh, and he gives it a squeeze, the warmth of his fingers seeping through my sweats, warming my leg.

I peel my eyes away from the growing mountains, the white caps and the monstrous evergreens. Colorado has a beauty you could get lost in for hours. Endless forests and landscapes which hold an infinite darkness, you can’t help but stare into it and watch so much overwhelming greatness consume you.

You can’t help but feel small in a world so large.

“I am home,” I whisper, my eyes connecting with Hades’s. The dark blue in them twinkles brightly as they watch me, and I can’t help the small smile pulling at the corners of my lips.

Even after everything transpiring over the last few days, I feel at peace.

*I’m home.*

But it’s not the place, it’s the people.

A quick glance over my shoulder shows Adrianna tucked in the center seat, her car seat curled around her. Her face is buried into her blanket.

Alastor has his arm around the back of the car seat, his head tilted against the side as he lets out a light snore. *Protective.*

Kennedy sits on the other side, his head cradled in his seat belt as he sleeps.

Brennan and Liam are driving in the vehicle behind us as we head through the last stretch of mountains and make our way back to Aurora.

“It feels weird, being back home,” I murmur, keeping my voice soft as to not wake anyone up.

Hades takes his hand off my thigh, placing it on the steering wheel as he adjusts himself in the seat, looking way too delicious driving in his Jeep. It makes my mouth water, the ease in which he moves his body. He always has, but since everything has happened and I’m coming home, there’s this assuredness in him. A relief I didn’t know he so desperately needed.

I missed him, and I missed being able to touch him freely without fear or guilt. Though, I can’t deny the small part of me that still feels the pain Princeton etched into my heart.

I miss our happy moments, and I miss the family we created together. I’d be lying if I didn’t say there wasn’t a piece of me that missed him. But not the monster in him, the loving man who once upon a time cherished every ounce of me.

I don’t think that man even exists anymore.

My eyes glance toward Hades. He’s slipped his glasses over his eyes, his beard having grown out some, though I can still see the cut of his sharp cheekbones, glass against creamy skin.

Hades may be a monster, but I’ll forever choose him. With bloodstained hands and scars etched deep within him, our love has always been the light within his darkness. Our love will always transcend the death and evil in the world.

I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but I do know I’ll always be safe with Hades Gray beside me.

I’ll never be so close to death at the hands of another. I refuse to fall victim to another second of abuse.

My heart aches thinking of Adrianna, and what she may be missing out on after losing her father. But the loss of her father will allow her to not be a lifelong witness to abuse. She doesn’t deserve that. No child deserves to witness that.

I’ve felt the ache of a missing parent, and I refuse to speak bad of him to her, but I do feel as if it’s for the best.

He’s not right. He’s sick.

And he was so close to killing her own mother.

I shake my head, ashamed for loving a man so evil and manipulative.

I deserve better. Adrianna deserves better.

“What are you thinking about?” Hades murmurs.

I sigh, adjusting in my seat. My butt and legs are far past numb, and I’m glad we’re getting close to Denver.

Hades doesn’t have a home. He’s been living in California this entire time, but the guys each have their own place, and I guess we’re staying with Alastor until Hades gets a place.

He says *we*, as if I’m moving in with him. I don’t have the ability to refuse. I don’t know if I even want to.

“Just a lot on my mind,” I reply.

“You’re thinking of *him*.” The words are said evenly, though I can feel the venom beneath each letter. His lip curls back, revealing sharp teeth.

He’s a wild animal. Possessive. Protective. And I know the last thing he wants is for me to spend another second thinking about Princeton.

It’s difficult to speak to a man that wholeheartedly wants you and admit your heart is still healing from another.

Just because I don’t want him anymore, that does not mean my heart doesn’t reveal an open wound that is still in the process of mending.

“Not necessarily. It’s just a lot to take in, everything that’s happened…” My fingers drift to the bruises on my neck. Every swallow brings an ache to my throat. I hate this feeling, how associated Princeton has to be with nearly every movement.

I don’t need the reminder of the trauma.

“You need to stop thinking about him, Vivianna. He’s not your issue to worry about anymore.”

I shove my hands in my pockets so he can’t see me picking at my nails. I can’t help it, I’m nervous.

“It’s not even about him, but what about the house? We just started a fire in a quiet neighborhood and walked away like nothing happened. If Princeton does talk to the police, he’s not going to protect me in any way.”

“Vivianna, I swear to God, if you bring up the fucking cops one more time, I’m going to make you walk the rest of the way home,” Alastor groans from the back seat, clearly not as asleep as I initially thought.

I glance at him over my shoulder with narrowed eyes. “I have a valid reason to be worried.”

He lifts his head, his tired eyes annoyed. “No, I think you’ve talked about the police at least twice in every state. We haven’t gotten pulled over yet, so maybe you should let it go and quit giving yourself a fucking hernia over nothing. Don’t worry until there’s something to worry about.”

I blink, turning back around and glancing at Hades. “Princeton won’t keep quiet,” I mumble.

Hades sighs, opening up his window and allowing the cool, fresh breeze of the mountains to infiltrate the car. His face is stone, not giving away an ounce of emotion. “I’ll keep him quiet,” is all he says.

I pick at my nails again, wanting to interrogate and see what he means by that, but I can’t, because while conversations of the police upset Alastor, conversations about Princeton upset Hades.

How can I not speak of any of them, though? They are the center of why we’re in this position in the first place.

Slouching down in my seat, I glance back out the window as we head toward the city. The roads become more populated, the mountains shrinking as the city grows around us.

We’re home.

Overwhelming relief hits me, and I know, without a doubt, this is the path I’m meant to be on.

~

“Here.” Alastor points toward a small rambler, his body shoved between mine and Hades’s seat as we navigate down the neighborhood.

I stare up at the light blue house with white shutters, wondering how in the world my unconventional brother ended up living in such a conventional house.

*There’s even a small garden out front.*

“You live *here?*” I gawk, confused. Is this the same brother?

“Yeah. Was a crack dealer’s house and bought it for a fucking penny. Been fixing it up. It’s dope inside.” He sounds genuinely excited, and I turn to look at him, amazed this is the same brother.

He really is sober.

The backs of my eyes burn with tears, though I blink them away as Hades pulls into the small driveway. The guys behind us park on the street as the sun begins to set over the mountains in the distance.

It feels like home.

We amble out of the truck, and Hades goes to the trunk to grab the pack ’n’ play and our bags. I pass Alastor as I climb into the back seat, staring down at Adrianna, who has a glob of drool dripping down the corner of her chin.

I wipe it away with my thumb, and she startles, her eyes going wide before she blinks, looking around.

“Hi, baby. We’re here,” I murmur, giving her a kiss on her forehead.

She looks around, sleepy-eyed and wild-haired. “Home?” she asks, confused.

My face twists. *Is this home?*

“Yeah, Adri. We’re home.”

Unbuckling her, I lift her sweaty body into my arms and follow the guys into Alastor’s house.

This is more like it.

Decked out in darks and neutrals, the house is much more updated and modern than the outside. A massive dark gray rug sits at my feet, a black table next to me.

It’s wide open, clearly an older home having had some renovations done to make it more of an open floor plan.

I bend down, setting Adrianna on her wobbly feet. She waddles her way down the hall and into the kitchen, a little disoriented, her blankie dragging behind her.

“So, this is the crib.” Alastor tears his sweatshirt off, tossing it over a kitchen chair. Dark woods against white counters. He’s really put a lot of work into this place.

The evening natural light filters in through the windows, and I walk past the kitchen, heading toward the living room. A large black sectional sits against the wall, and even though I’ve been sitting for hours, the soft cushions call to me, and I head toward it, sitting down with a groan.

“This place is nice, Al,” I sigh, glancing over at him. “Mom and Dad would like it.”

His body tenses slightly, even with his face softening. “I know they would.”

Adrianna walks to the back door, spreading fingerprints across the glass.

“Come over here, Adri.” I cringe, wondering how these guys will handle the constant mess of a small child. It’s never clean, no matter how much you scrub.

Hades walks up to her, swinging her up into his arms without a second thought. “She’s fine, Vivianna. *Relax*.”

The need to control takes over. It’s almost like a panic in my bones, twisting with an intensity to leap off the couch and be in charge.

It’s how I’ve been for the last few years. It’s like my body doesn’t know how to do anything else.

“Fuck, that was a long-ass drive,” Kennedy grumbles, heading toward the kitchen. I glance up at him, watching as he tears his fingers through his hair. “I’m going to head home and crash.”

“Same, bro.” Liam shakes his head, glancing over at me briefly. “Good to have you back, though. Villain. It’s been a long time.” He walks up to me, his hand patting my head like a dog.

I bat his hand away, fixing the flyaway strands. “I’m still mad at all of you.”

“How can you be mad at us after all this time?” Brennan grumbles, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. He chugs the entire contents before tossing it into the trash. “You started the fire, Villain.”

My jaw clenches, my eyes turning to Hades. He holds Adrianna tightly, bouncing her slightly back and forth. Her fingers squeeze at his tattoos, amazed at the difference in skin from anyone else she’s ever around. I wince, knowing how those baby nails feel when they’re pinching you. He doesn’t seem to mind, though, his eyes solely focused on me. Heavy, burning.

His eyes cement me in place, as if his fingers slide into my chest and pull the breath from my lungs like a string.

“I’m mad at you, too,” I choke. “All this time, and you never said a word about Alastor. You know I would’ve wanted to see my brother.”

His eyes narrow. “I wasn’t going to lure you back with your brother. You needed to come home all on your own.”

I swallow down the emotions. Not sure how to decipher between right and wrong at this point.

“I’m heading out. I’ll be back later this evening,” Liam says with a yawn, stretching his arms over his head.

The guys do that hand clap, back clap ritual thing they always do when they are saying hello or goodbye.

Once they’re gone, it’s just Alastor, Hades, Adrianna, and me.

“Hades, let me talk to my sister,” Alastor snaps. The air suddenly changes. Crackling, popping, a coldness curling around my limbs.

Hades rolls his eyes, unlocking the back door and stepping outside. He pauses in the doorway, turning around and giving us a heavy look.

“Don’t fucking hurt her after everything she’s just been through, Alastor. I’m warning you.”

Alastor waves him off. “Back the fuck off my sister. Whatever is between you guys, we’re blood. You aren’t. So, *fuck off*.”

I swallow. *He knows.*

Hades turns to me. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

I give him a small nod, wondering how explosive their relationship has been the last couple years. Hades and Alastor have always been like brothers, and that means fighting like brothers.

When a sister gets in the middle, I can’t imagine how volatile it has been between them.

The door shuts, Hades setting Adrianna down on the ground. He grabs her chubby, pale hand in his tattooed, strong grip, pulling her across the yard.

“Viv,” Alastor grumbles, walking around and sitting next to me on the couch. He doesn’t hesitate, grabbing toward me.

Instinct and reflex take over, and I flinch as his arms come toward mine, instantly regretting it when I see the horror on his face.

“Really?” he snaps, his face twisting in anger. “*Me*?”

I force my body to relax, scooting closer to the brother who I know, even if he were on the heaviest of drugs, would never lay a hand on me.

“I’m sorry. I’m just… it’s been a long road.” Not the drive, but… *life.* I sigh, laying my head on his shoulder.

His body is tense, even when his arm comes up and gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Why would you stay with him if he was hurting you? Why would you ever put up with that?”

I pull away from him. I get it. I understand. Being with an abuser and sitting through the constant cycle doesn’t only make you look like a victim, but also weak.

People always ask why you stay so long, but you really can’t answer that question or understand until you’ve been in the situation yourself.

I don’t expect Alastor to understand, though I can see why he’d be angry. I just don’t want him to be angry with me.

“It’s hard to explain, Al. It was difficult. I loved him.” And I did. I truly did. If I were to be honest with myself, a part of me still loves him. I think I always will.

“Tell me,” he growls, forgetting about my skittishness as he grabs my chin, pulling my eyes to his. My insides twitch with discomfort. “Tell me how you could be with a son of a bitch like that and let him,” he licks his lips, staring at the bruises on my neck with disgust. “Put his fucking hands on you. You know I would’ve killed him a long time ago.”

I nod. “I know,” I whisper. It’s why I kept it a secret from Hades.

Hades would’ve never let him survive if he knew how cruel he’s been to me.

“He’s not going to survive. I hope you know that.”

I swallow, wishing everything that is Princeton could just disappear, but I know these guys better. They won’t let this go until Princeton is gone, for good.

“Hades made that pretty clear,” I whisper, dragging my eyes to the man in question. He looks so natural outside with Adrianna, and it makes my heart clench.

I don’t understand what’s going on, or what’s going to happen, but I realize I have no control over any of it.

Not anymore.

“Hades,” Alastor growls, causing goosebumps to prickle along my skin. “He loves you.”

He says the words with shock, perhaps some annoyance.

I look to my brother, truly look at him. He stares at me deeply, a layer of betrayal in his eyes. But it looks faded, as if he’s had a lot of time to think over everything that’s happened.

“I love him, Alastor.” I press my fingers against his knee. “I’m sorry. I never… I didn’t mean for anything to happen, and neither did he.”

His face twists, and he moves away from me, sliding across the couch so we aren’t touching. His arms rest along the back of the couch, his knees spreading slightly. His chest is broader than it once was. No longer a drug addict’s thin, bony chest, but one of a man who works out as it stretches across his black shirt. His jeans are trim, well kempt, and clean.

My nose burns at how healthy he looks.

“I told him I’m going to kill him when you get home.” He says the words simply. He means them.

My eyes flare. “No,” I snap. “You guys need to drop whatever feud is between the both of you.”

He turns his eyes away from me, looking at his best friend. “He touched my baby sister. The rules are written from the beginning of time. You don’t touch baby sisters. You don’t touch blood.”

“He saved me,” I urge. “He saved me time and time again. And I love him. Would you really do that, *to me*?”

His jaw clenches. He knows he shouldn’t, but his pride is stubborn.

“He knew what he was getting into when he touched you.”

My brows pull together. “It wasn’t just a hookup. It’s not only a physical connection, Alastor. Don’t you realize that?”

He cuts his glare to mine, malice in his eyes. “I do. I realized the moment I saw you guys together how deep it goes. Do you know how hard it is for me? To see my best friend and my sister have a deeper connection than I’ve seen anyone *ever* have? Stronger than our parents’? I’ve never seen two people hold such an energy between them. People don’t even want to stand in between the two of you in fear of getting swept up in whatever fucking magic you guys have. I get it, Viv. It’s true love. Probably the truest love I’ve ever seen. It’s just…” He growls, shoving off the couch. “Motherfuck, Vivianna!” he roars, his fingers threading through his messy hair. He pulls at the strands, and they stand on end. “It’s my best friend!” he shouts, the glass windows shaking with the force of his voice. “Can you not love anyone else in the world besides the guy who helped raise you? It feels fucking wrong!”

I can feel the energy in the room darken.

A shadow lingers outside, moments before the door slides open. Hades stands there, his eyes narrowed at his friend.

“Alastor,” he warns.

Alastor is too far gone. He may be sober, but my brother is my brother. He’s always been a bit of a short fuse, a loose cannon with a burning wick.

This is that moment.

Alastor stands up and steps toward Hades, his fist springing out before I can blink. He clocks Hades in the cheek, but that’s all Hades gives him before he grabs onto his wrists, spinning him around until Alastor’s back slams against Hades’s front. He bends him forward slightly, pinning his arms down. “Hit me in front of the kid again and I’ll dislocate your knees, brother,” he growls low in Alastor’s ear.

“Mommy,” Adrianna shouts from outside, a hint of fear in her tone.

She doesn’t like seeing Hades like this.

It’s odd, she didn’t react at all when she saw Princeton lose his shit.

I stand off the couch, and Hades instantly releases Alastor. “We’re going to be together whether you like it or not, Alastor. Either deal with it, or don’t. But it’s not changing the outcome.”

Alastor spins around, his face red beneath his facial hair. “And what’s that?”

Hades lazily drags his eyes to mine. “She’s mine.”

Adrianna wobbles inside, and I walk over to her, lifting her up as I stand beside Hades.

Alastor looks between the two of us, shock, anger, and maybe a little relief on his face. “I can’t fucking take this right now.” He points his finger at me. “We’re not done talking about this.” Shaking his head, he takes off down the hall. “I need a shower.”

He storms off, and Hades turns toward him. “Don’t swear in front of the kid!” he barks, shaking his head.

I give Adrianna a hug, burying my face into her neck. “You need a bath, too.”

She giggles, wiggling around in my arms. The tension already fading from her at the talk of a bath.

Hades smirks, pushing her messy hair out of her face with his tattooed fingers. “I’m going to go get a house. Stay here. But if Alastor starts more shit, just call me.”

I blink at him.

“You’re going to… get a house? Right now?”

He stares back at me. “Yeah, Viv. The three of us can’t just camp out in Alastor’s place forever. We need a house of our own. We’re going to kill each other if we stay here.”

I’m so confused. Like, I get it, but I’m also confused.

“So, you’re just going to go pick out a house and buy it… *right now*?”

He nods.

“With what money?” I’ve been down this road before. Buying a house isn’t an easy or cheap process. It takes time.

He chuckles. “Don’t worry about it. Give her a bath and relax. Stay here. I’ll be back soon.” His fingers wrap around the back of my neck, and he gives me a squeeze before bending down and giving me a kiss on my cheek. I’m desperate for more, having not kissed him in years, but I’m gripping Adrianna, and I have a feeling once we kiss, it won’t stop there.

He’s gone before I can blink, wrapping me in his scent and his warmth.

I’m so in love with him.

~

With the Coors Light plastic cup, I tilt Adrianna’s head back as I rinse the men’s soap from her blonde hair.

It looks like I need to take a trip to the grocery store soon.

Adrianna lets out a whimper, loving baths, yet hating water in her eyes. I go quickly while rinsing her hair out, then add some more bubbles and stand up, walking to the toilet to let her play.

She does so with ease, not at all worried about our change in life as she grabs bubbles and rubs them along the tiled walls. I smile sadly at her, wondering if she’s going to hate me one day for taking her away from her dad.

The door creaks open, Alastor popping his head around the corner of the door. Hair drips down his jaw, his blondish hair darkened from the shower as it flops wildly around his head.

I hold my breath, worried he’s still in the same mood as he was earlier.

My lovely, unpredictable brother.

“Hey, Viv,” he murmurs softly.

My body settles, only slightly.

“Hi, big brother.”

He walks in, giving Adrianna a small smile before pinning his hip against the counter. “How are you doing?”

I shrug one shoulder up to my ear. “As good as I can, given the circumstances.”

He stares at me for long seconds, his eyes narrowing slightly. Then his eyes drop, a heaviness entering his gaze. “I heard… what happened. Before you left the carnival.”

I shell up, the invisible walls around my soul rising high.

I don’t want to talk about it.

*I don’t want to talk about it.*

“I’m fine.” My tone is void of emotions. Robotic.

“You’re not.”

“I am,” I growl, keeping my eyes on my bare toes.

“Vivianna,” he snaps, and I automatically lift my eyes to his.

“You aren’t fine. I can see it in your eyes. Who the fuck are you trying to fool?”

My eyes dart to Adrianna’s, though she can’t sense the tension, too enthralled with the overabundance of bubbles.

“Sorry. Swearing.” Alastor winces.

“I’m as fine as I’m ever going to get, Alastor. It took a long time for me to even get to this point, and it’s a hell of a better place than I was in when I left Carnival de Morte. I think I’m fine.”

His eyes darken. “I feel like it’s partly my fault. If I never would’ve sent you there, none of this would have happened.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What happened to me has nothing to do with you. Don’t blame yourself, Al. It wasn’t your fault. I said *I’m fine*.”

“Fine is fake as fuck. You need to go sit in a dark room and say some Hail Marys or something. Deal with the trauma for a little bit.”

I roll my eyes. “Trust me, I was alone for a while before I found my way back to reality. Hail Marys were the last thing I needed.”

Alastor shoves off the counter, walking up to me with stone features. My body locks up, and I lean back. “What are you doing?”

Alastor brings his pointer finger beneath my chin, and he raises my gaze to his. I dart my eyes away, and he grips my chin, pointing my face toward his. “Look at me,” he growls.

It hurts. It hurts to look. It hurts to confront what I don’t want to confront.

“You were raped,” he states clearly, as if I don’t fucking know. His voice is low, only I can hear the disturbing words he empties into the air.

I shiver.

“Raped, Vivianna. Fucking brutalized by a man who had no right to touch you.”

“Stop, Al,” I snap, shoving him away.

“No. I’m not going to let you hide from the grief. You know why? Because that’s what I did. I hid from the grief of Mom and Dad. Where did I end up?”

*High. Homeless. Hopeless.*

“Do you remember that night so vividly, it plays on a constant loop on your brain? The memories are so clear, yet you wonder if they ever happened in the first place? I’m back there every night, lying in bed as I remember what it was like to show up at the house and see it on fire, listening to Mom scream from inside the house. Pulling the fucking plug and watching her chest stop moving. Abandoning you. Failing you.” His voice breaks, and my body shudders, tears shedding from my eyes and slipping down my cheeks.

“The pain I feel is nothing close to what you have felt from some man violating the fuck out of you and taking something that never should’ve been taken by him. To feel it emotionally, physically, mentally. It’s not only scars on the outside, but the inside, too.”

I *hurt.*

“Stop,” I croak, hating how Alastor’s words bring me back to that night in the woods.

“No, I’m not going to stop. Feel the pain. Remember what it felt like, what you thought about in that moment. How it felt when he tore your heart and soul in two.”

A sob breaks from my chest, and I look up at him through watery eyes. “Why are you doing this?” I shove him away, and he stumbles back, only to walk back up to me.

“Because I want you to grieve so we can move the fuck on!” he barks at me, completely uncaring about swearing in front of Adrianna.

“I am healed!” I shout at him.

“You aren’t! I can see it in your face, and anyone who believes you is a fucking fool! You were raped by a fucking creep, Vivianna! In the woods, by yourself. Violated and hurt. Eat the pain. Let it overtake you, and then fucking bury it!”

I curl over, the pain rolling over my limbs as I remember the feeling of Borris’s hands yanking my thighs apart, the feeling of his thick member prodding between my legs.

I feel sick.

I groan, shoving my head between my knees as it all comes back, as if it just happened yesterday instead of years ago.

“I hate you,” I groan.

He grabs me by the back of the shirt, hauling me up until we’re as level as we can be, with him standing at six feet, and me five and a half. “You hate me now, but you’ll thank me later. Go in the guest bedroom and come to terms with your shit. I’ll deal with the kid. And tomorrow, we’re going to heal and move on with our lives.”

I glance at Adrianna, whose skin is beginning to look a little pale as the water cools.

“She needs to get out of the bath,” I murmur nasally, my sinuses clogged with emotion.

He shoves me away. “Quit being a mom for a minute. Go be a fucking broken kid who’s had too much taken away from her. If I’m supposed to deal with you having a kid with an abusive asshole and being in love with my best friend, you better bet your ass you’re going to not be some half-present sister with her thoughts lost in the past. We’re not giving each other half of each other anymore. We’re going to be here, fully. We’re all we’ve got left.”

I look at him, the pain consuming me. He’s opened up the doors to that horrible night, and now all I can feel are thick fingers bruising my skin.

“I hate this,” I whisper, every inch of my skin covered in goosebumps.

He shoves me toward the door. “Go hate it away from your kid, and come back tomorrow full, for her. For all of us. But most of all, yourself.”

Broken and disgusted with my own skin, I walk away on trembling legs and make my way to the guest bedroom. It’s simple, a full bed in the center of the room with a solid wooden dresser on the other end. I step toward the bed, then pause on my feet, staring at it.

I feel too gross for the clean sheets.

I want to shower.

But water and soap never take away the grime of Borris.

I turn in a circle, not sure which direction I actually want to go, until I spin on my feet, making my way toward the closet. I pull on the wooden door, seeing pitch blackness inside. It’s exactly what I need.

A sob breaks in my chest as I duck underneath Alastor’s stray leather jackets, falling to my knees on the carpet. It burns against my knees, and I let my forehead hit the corner of the wall as my entire spine shudders in pain.

It hurts.

It hurts so bad.

It’s as if Alastor dug deep inside my chest and opened the wound that’s been covered by a translucent sheet. He could see through it. How could he not, as my own brother?

Alastor knows pain, and he could see mine as if I laid it out for his own private viewing.

He wants me to release the grief and the pain? Well, he pulled it out of me, whether I wanted to confront them or not.

And now, it feels as if they are all out on the table.

My parents.

My brother.

Hades.

Princeton.

Borris.

Jenna.

Losing my friends.

They all commingle, brewing on the surface of my skin until I want to tear it from my bones. A horrid, pained groan rips through my throat as I mash my face against the wall, sobbing loud, agonizing groans in the corner of the dark closet.

My throat burns from Princeton’s hands. My thighs quiver from Borris’s intrusion. My heart aches from the truth of Hades starting the fire.

My soul screams the same scream my mom screamed to me.

“I can’t do this,” I gasp, clutching my sore throat as all the pain I’ve ever experienced comes to the surface.

“Help,” I gasp, my hands dropping to the carpet. I pull at the soft fibers, so full in here, barely touched. I ruin them as I tug them from the floor, wishing they were the handlebars to my life.

Stop the pain. *Stop the pain.*

My moans and sobs intensify, and it feels like everything that’s ever wronged me spills out in the form of pained tears. I let them drench my clothes, my sinuses clogged until I can barely breathe.

And I keep crying.

I don’t know how long I cry for, but I feel as if my oxygen level is low as I gasp for breath, all the traumas I’ve experienced coming to a head.

There’s only one difference now.

I don’t want death.

I only want life.

And it hurts that much more.

~

Bright light shines in my face, and I flinch, my swollen, burning eyes sliding open to see Hades staring down at me with a livid look on his face.

“Fucking hell,” he snaps, spinning around and stalking out of the room.

*Thump.*

“I told you to not fuck with her!” he roars, followed by the familiar sound of them squabbling,

Disoriented and exhausted, I stumble to my feet and out of the room, heading toward the source of the noise. I can see them in Alastor’s room, Alastor half asleep as he swings at Hades, his body whipping across the bed.

Hades hits him back, and my eyes widen when I see them in a full-on fistfight.

“Stop!” I say, my voice still nasally. I wipe at my tear-crusted eyes, rushing toward them and slamming my palms against both of their chests. “Stop!”

“What did you do to her?” Hades growls at Alastor. “Look at your sister! She’s a fucking mess!”

Alastor looks over at me, pride in his eyes. “She is.”

Hades swings again, straight into Alastor’s cheek. Alastor flies back, his back slamming against the wall as he tumbles off the bed.

I turn to Hades. “Stop it!” I scream. “It’s not his fault!”

His eyes narrow. “Who else could have possibly made you this fucking upset?”

I take a deep breath, the weight finally lifted from my chest.

The weight, the grief, the pain… it’s gone.

A wide smile covers my face.

I turn to Alastor. “It worked.”

He smiles back at me, his face already swelling and bruised. He shoves off the wall, rushing toward me and wrapping his arms around me, blood dripping down his nose and smothering between his lips. He flinches slightly as he clutches me against him. “So fucking proud of you, Viv,” he murmurs into my hair.

“What’s going on?” Hades snaps.

I look up at Hades with watery eyes. “Alastor helped me, Hades. He didn’t hurt me.”

He swallows, and I stare at him, not wanting to explain the pain I was feeling, but I don’t have to. Not when it comes to Hades, because he can read every inch of me. In the depths of me, it’s a book made specifically for Hades, and he’s the only one who can read the print.

“What the hell did he do?” His voice is softer this time, not nearly as sharp and full of death.

“What only a brother can do. Make her take care of her shit.” He shoves away from me, and I gravitate toward Hades.

Hades stares at me, his jaw clenching as his eyes rove over every inch of my face, before falling down my body. “You’re different.”

I feel different.

I feel alive.

I swallow, not sure how to explain the fact that a cry over my past released such immense pain. That the darkness of the closet and the overwhelming agony wasn’t torture, but therapy I so desperately needed.

Truthfully, there is so much pain and trauma to work through, but something about sitting in that closet and feeling every wound in my soul allowed the horror of Borris to die. That pain has simply… *died.*

“Good different,” he amends.

I smirk, my hand rising and resting against his chest. I can feel the heavy beat of his heart pound through his shirt, and it beats in sync with mine.

My eyes settle closed, the energy so strong between us, it vibrates through the room so intensely I can taste it on my tongue, I can feel it in the way the hair on my arms rise.

A bond which cannot be broken.

His hand rises, his fingers circling around my wrist. I gasp at the warmth, my eyes fluttering open and connecting with his.

He hauls me against him, chest to chest, and I know, this is it.

I’m finally healing.

# Chapter Two

## Hades

I

pull her through the room, ignoring the dark energy which radiates from Alastor. I don’t give a shit at this point, I have my butterfly back, and I’m not letting her go.

I’m having all of her.

Forever.

I drag her into the spare bedroom, kicking the door shut with my foot. Her breathing picks up, and I can smell the arousal dripping between her legs.

She’s so needy, as she always has been for me.

I stalk to the bed, releasing her arm. Her legs give out, her butt falling to edge of the bed. She looks up at me, lust and desire and fear in her eyes.

My fingers fall to my belt buckle, and I watch her with a steady gaze. “I found us a home, little butterfly. Do you want to know about it?” I ask as I pull the belt through the first loop.

Her eyes flare, her head nodding. “That quickly?”

I nod, listening to the metal clank of the belt. I grab the edge, pulling quickly and listening as it whistles, sliding through the loops. “Yes.”

“When do we move in? Won’t it be a while?”

It would be, but I bought us a brand-new vacant home. I’m also paying cash, which means we can close next week.

“No, baby girl. We close in a week.”

Hope and hesitation are a war within her gaze, and I hate how there is even a little bit of nerves that flicker through her when it comes to me.

“Ask me about it,” I murmur, my fingers going to the button on my pants. I pop it open, undoing my zipper and allowing my pants to loosen over my waist. I’m already growing hard, watching her watch me, her eyes darting between mine and my growing erection.

“Tell me everything,” she rasps.

“I will,” I begin. “Once you lean back on that bed and touch yourself.”

Her thighs clench together, her toes curling in her black socks.

“Lean back, Vivianna. Take your pants off, spread your legs, and touch yourself while I tell you about our new home.”

I watch as a slow bloom of pink trails up her neck, covering the apples of her cheeks. She leans back on the off-white comforter, her hands going to her leggings. She pulls them down, yanking them off her ankles and dropping them to the floor. A small pair of pink panties cover her, and when she spreads her legs, I can see the darkening fabric soaking with her arousal.

“Take them off,” I command.

Her thumbs hook in the waistband, and she pulls them off, her folds glistening.

She leans back on her elbows, spreading her legs. The lips of her sex fall open, her pulsing clit making an appearance.

“Touch yourself,” I rasp, my hand going into my briefs. I pull out my erection, suddenly throbbing like it never has before. I grip the base in my hand, tugging slightly.

Her fingers dance down her side, my entire body twitching with the need to feel her skin against mine.

I bring my hand up to my mouth, spitting in the center of my palm before bringing it back to my erection, starting a slow stroke.

Vivianna’s fingers reach her clit, and she slides her fingers across the swollen bud, her body arching with each pass. Her chest rises and falls, quickening as her need intensifies.

“I bought us a two-story home on the edge of town. It’s black, tall, with white shutters.”

Her head falls to the mattress, her eyes falling closed.

“Look at me,” I growl.

Her head pops up, dazed eyes staring into mine.

“Sink your fingers into your cunt.”

She does as I ask, her pointer and middle fingers sliding in deep.

“There’s a large front porch that has a view of the mountains. Stone pillars out front. Three-car garage. Just enough room for my bike.”

She lets out a moan.

“When you walk inside—” I grunt, my fingers tightening around my cock. I can feel the blood rushing through me. My body tenses, so close to finishing even though I’m not ready for release. Not even close. “—the first thing you’ll notice is the high ceilings that lead to the second story. The floor are a dark, cool wood throughout the main level.”

Her back arches, her eyes hazy as she pulls her glistening fingers out, running them up to her clit.

“The kitchen is black with white marbled countertops, a large pantry for everything you could ever need. A large living room with vaulted ceilings and plenty of windows to look out at the backyard. We have a huge fence, and plenty of space to set up a swing set for Adrianna.”

She moans, bringing her free hand to her breasts, pulling on her nipples through her threadbare shirt. Her eyes flutter closed, and I step closer, pumping my throbbing cock.

“Open your eyes, butterfly,” I growl.

She does as I ask, eyes filled with lust and need staring up at me.

“Be a good girl and come get my cock wet.” I remove my hand, and she scrambles up, leaning forward and swallowing me whole.

I hiss through my teeth as I grab her hair, giving it a small tug as I jolt my hips forward, the tip of my cock hitting the back of her throat. “Good girl,” I growl.

She moans, the vibrations hitting my cock. I drag my fingers through her hair and along her jaw, cupping her throat. Pulling back, my glistening cock springs free, and I tilt her head up to mine, staring down at her.

She looks up at me, her lids half mast, her lips swollen and damp.

I spit into her mouth.

She licks her lips, her eyes flaring in desire as she swallows me down. “Spit on my cock.”

She does.

“Good girl.” I pull her by the neck, and she sucks me into her mouth again, moaning as she eagerly bobs her head.

Blood rushes through me, and I let out a groan as I tear myself from her mouth.

I bring my hands to the hem of her shirt, yanking it over her head and tossing it behind me. My cock bobs between my legs, and Vivianna is eager for it, though I hold her back.

The moment my fingers grab her legs, she tenses, staring up at me.

Fear.

I ignore it, narrowing my eyes, challenging her to be even slightly afraid of me. With each hand on each of her thighs, I tug her toward me quickly. Her spine hits the mattress, her eyes wide.

That’s all it takes for her to lose control.

She shoots up, her fingers wrapping around my arms. She tries to pull herself up, taking over. She mashes her lips with mine, and I grab her jaw, moving her how I want her to be.

Her hand goes to my wrist, and she pulls my fingers away from her jaw, grunting in aggravation.

“Why are you fighting me?” I growl.

“I need control,” she grunts, grinding herself against me. I can feel her arousal against the top of my thigh.

My head tilts toward the ceiling as I bark out a laugh before looking down at her with narrowed eyes and lips pressed into a thin line.

I don’t know what kind of pants she was wearing with that fucker, but here, with me, she wears no pants.

She kneels.

“You control nothing, butterfly. I own your skin, your bones, and soul. If you want to take charge, I hope you’re ready for a handprint on your pretty little backside and those beautiful markings on your wrists.” I lean down, dragging my teeth along the slender column of her throat. “And the only words whispering from your lips will be *yes, Daddy*.”

She tenses, as if she doesn’t want to relinquish control. She has no choice, not when it comes to me.

Her hands go to my shoulders, her nails digging in. She moves her hips again, attempting to keep even a shred of the control she wishes for.

A laugh rumbles in my chest, and I’ve had enough of this silly game she’s attempting to play.

I step forward, gripping her thighs and pulling them apart. “Release me,” I command.

She wants to control, but beneath the fight, she is my perfect submissive, and a simple command has her responding, as if all the fight slips from her.

She falls to her back, her body giving a small bounce when her spine hits the mattress.

I grab her hips, flipping her over. She lets out a squeal as I grab onto her hips with spread fingers, tugging her up until she’s on her knees.

“Tell me,” I growl, running my fingers along her soft backside.

It’s begging to be red.

“Tell you what?” she whimpers, her thighs rubbing together. She needs the release, desperate to put pressure on her throbbing sex.

*Slap.*

“Tell me who you belong to.”

“You. I belong to you. I always have,” she moans, pushing her ass toward me. She wants more.

*Slap.*

“Are you in control?” I growl, squeezing the pink skin.

She shakes her head.

“What was that?” I ask lowly, the rumble vibrating from my chest.

“No!” she cries, her hand dropping as she slides her fingers between her folds.

I growl, stepping forward and tearing her hands from between her thighs. “You’re getting a little greedy, butterfly. If you come, I may have to punish you.”

She drops her head to the mattress, her body shuddering with desire. She gives me a small shake of her head.

“You come when I give you permission, and only then.”

I pull her hands up, dragging her up the bed until she’s at the headboard. Grabbing both hands, I wrap her fingers around the curve on the top, giving them a slight squeeze.

“Am I in control?” I ask quietly.

“Yes,” she whimpers, flexing her fingers.

“Yes… what?” I ask simply, dragging my fingers along the back of her neck, dancing them down her spine.

“Yes, Daddy,” she mewls.

“Good girl,” I praise, gripping her hips before lifting my palm.

*Slap.*

“Now stay where you are if you want to orgasm tonight.”

Her body tenses, her breath barely escaping her throat. She grips the headboard tightly as I step to the end of the bed, staring at her posture.

Back arched, pert ass up in the air. Arms extended straight in front of her, and I let out a groan as I kneel onto the bed. “You look so fucking beautiful.” I drag my palm along her creamy, naked skin, electricity shooting between our bodies.

She lets out a moan, arching further, backing her ass into my erection.

She’s so needy, she forgets about my commands.

I slide two fingers into her dripping cunt, sliding around her arousal. “Shall I withhold your orgasm, Vivianna?” I murmur.

She tenses, glancing at me over her shoulder. “No! I’m sorry,” she whimpers. “I’ll be still.”

“Good girl,” I whisper, grabbing her hips with both hands. I tug her against me, her ass slamming against my hips.

I grip the base of my cock, sliding it between her glistening folds. Lining up, I slide into her, stretching her walls until I’m seated fully inside her. “Whose pussy is this?” I groan, gripping her ass and spreading her cheeks.

“Yours,” she moans, her knuckles whitening around the headboard.

“Hmmm?” I pull out slightly, sliding back in roughly until our skin slaps.

“Yours, Daddy,” she cries out. I can feel the walls of her cunt flutter around me.

“Fuck, that pussy’s wet,” I groan, listening as the sound of our wet skin colliding fills the air. I can feel the blood rush through my cock, and I pull out of her quickly, lifting her by the waist and flipping her onto her back. Her fingers leave the headboard, moving to the pillow beneath her as she grips it tightly.

I grab her ankles, spreading her legs wide. She arches her back, her eyes locking with mine. I can’t stop looking at her. She’s so fucking beautiful, and she’s so mine. Leaning forward, I grab her jaw, pointing her face directly at mine. “You’re mine,” I growl, leaning down and pressing my lips against hers. I don’t close my eyes, and neither does she, staring into each other’s souls. My breath catches in my chest, growing until my rib cage aches.

Emotion fills me, painfully so as I pull back, our lips only a breath apart from each other.

I slip inside of her, feeling so fucking overwhelmed with love and hope and peace. She gasps, and I inhale, breathing in the entirety of her essence. I exhale just as she inhales, and I’ve never felt as close to her as I do in this moment.

“I love you,” I rasp against her lips.

“I love you.” The words are barely audible as they flutter from her lips, but each letter envelops my bones, holding me hostage. “I didn’t think it was possible to love someone this much,” she gasps.

I drag my hand to her heart, cupping her breast as my eyes settle closed, my thrusts slow, controlled as I feel our blood pump simultaneously. “It’s because you were born to become mine, butterfly. You were made for me.”

“The way my heart beats, it feels manic. It settles and goes wild at the same time whenever you’re near. As if I belong to you so much, my soul can’t handle it. The universe can’t handle our connection.”

“The universe knows we’re meant to be together, Vivianna. It’s everything else in the world that’s attempted to tear us apart. But now that we’re together—*now*, this is it. You’re here. With me. Until the end of time,” I mumble as I pull back, getting onto my knees as my eyes fall between her legs. “Everything about you is engraved with my name.” Her heart, soul, bones, blood, it’s all mine. Forever.

I speed up my thrusts, pounding into her quickly. Her body rocks, her neck arching as pleasure consumes her. My eyes dart past the bruises on her neck, refusing to entertain them tonight as an angelic moan slips past her lips. I speed up my thrusts, my fingers drifting to her lips. My thumb pulls at her bottom one, and her mouth drops open, eyes captivating.

She’s so fucking beautiful.

I feel her walls tighten around me as her orgasm rolls through her. I grind my teeth, holding back my own orgasm as I watch her fall apart beneath me.

My cock twitches, and I pull out of her, giving my erection a few pumps, it’s all it needs, before ropes of cum fall across her drenched folds, her lower stomach.

I taint her.

I claim her.

I slam my hand against her abdomen, smearing my seed into her skin, embedding it into her.

Glancing up at her, I stare at her flushed cheeks, the way her chest quakes.

“The cage you flew into? It’s locked.”

Her eyes narrow. “What do you mean?”

I drag my hand down her smooth skin as I slide off the bed. “I mean, you flew home to me. You’re caged in now,” I murmur, tapping at the cage of my ribs. “You aren’t ever flying free.”

~

The sun rises over the east, a cigarette perched between my fingers. I stare at the curls of smoke leaving the glowing tip, my other hand warm with the cup of coffee clutched in my grip.

Alastor sits beside me, quiet. A little too quiet, and I can imagine it’s because he heard what happened in the guest bedroom last night.

I don’t bring it up, though, as it’ll only cause a fight between us. Today isn’t about our problems, we have the rest of our lives to work out the bullshit of me and his sister being together.

Today is about Princeton.

The gate squeaks, the lock clicking as the door swings open.

It’s too early to deal with this shit, but better to handle this when Vivianna isn’t present. She’ll start a war, create more tension. And if I hear her even once defend the guy, I think I’ll lose my goddamn mind.

“Need. Coffee,” Liam grunts, plopping down in the seat beside me. His hood is curled over his head, his eyes barely visible.

Alastor shoves the coffeepot and a cup toward him, saying nothing.

“I’d rather have a beer,” Brennan grumbles, walking inside without another word.

Kennedy sits down, grabbing the pot and pouring himself and Liam a cup of coffee. “Where’s Villain?”

“Sleeping.” I bring the cigarette to my lips as I shift onto my side, digging into my pocket. I pull out her phone I nabbed from the nightstand, unlocking it with Adrianna’s birthdate. Scrolling through the contacts, I go to the fucking idiot abuser and bring up his number.

“What’s the plan?” Alastor asks quietly.

“Well, he’s dead.” I shrug my shoulders, not sure what else the plan could possibly be. I’m ready to call him up now and bring him here. Paint a mural of him for Vivianna. I’m so over the bullshit at this point, I’m just ready to move on. And we can’t fully move on until Princeton is out of the picture, completely.

“That’s the last step. What’s the first step?” Liam asks, bringing the steaming coffee up to his lips and taking a sip. The slurp is loud, and I scowl at him in disgust.

“Quit sounding like a ninety-year-old man, Liam,” I growl.

He smirks, bringing the cup up to his lips and doing an even longer, louder slurp.

The door opens, Brennan walking out with a bottle of beer. He sits down beside me, popping the top on the edge of the table before chugging down half the contents. “What’re we talking about?”

Kennedy sits forward, clearly the most put together for this meeting. “We need to figure out how to get Princeton here.”

I frown. “That’s the easy part. Let him know he can see Adrianna.”

“Will it even work, though?” Alastor asks. “And what happens when he comes here? He’ll easily know it’s a trap.”

I shrug. “Doesn’t matter, he’s enough of a dumbass that he’ll come here anyway.”

“Probably,” Kennedy mutters into his coffee, his voice muffled in his cup.

“So, we text him. We get him here. What do we tell Viv?” Alastor asks, leaning forward and pressing his elbows against the table. He looks stressed, and I know he’s worried about shit with Vivianna, but he’s sober now, and I know Vivianna will cling to him as she always has. He doesn’t need to worry.

“We tell her nothing,” I say simply. I have no intention of telling Vivianna that Princeton is in town. It’s only going to upset her and stress her out. She’ll withdraw from me, and that’s the last thing I’ll allow to happen.

Alastor laughs. “You must not know Vivianna as much as you think. She’ll know the second we start doing something behind her back that something’s up. We need to tell her, at least something.”

“Truth,” Liam grunts.

I sigh, dropping my burnt-out cigarette into my cup of coffee, setting it on the table before leaning back.

I want Vivianna to be out of this hell. She shouldn’t have to deal with any of this.

But Alastor is right, Vivianna will instantly know something is up.

“So, what do we tell her?” Kennedy asks, leaning forward. “We could just tell her we’re handling it and she doesn’t need to worry.”

I chuckle, knowing something like that will only get her more fucking nosy.

“Don’t even worry about that right now. We can worry about Villain later. What we need to be focusing on is how we’re going to get Princeton here.” This comes from Kennedy.

I nod, grabbing Vivianna’s phone and unlocking it again. Pulling out my own phone, I go to my text messages and open a new message, typing in Princeton’s phone number.

And the message just comes to me.

My fingers fly across the keyboard, my knuckles aching once I get to the end of my message.

*Sincerely, Hades Gray.*

“Let me see.” Alastor extends his hand, and I pass him the phone, leaning back and pulling out another cigarette, sparking up the tip as I watch his eyes pass over the screen.

“If you want to see Adrianna again and have her in your life, come to Colorado. Vivianna’s family is open to you having a relationship with your daughter, but you won’t be seeing Vivianna again. Adrianna should have her father in her life, and we know she misses you. If you want to see her, meet us in the empty parking lot behind the Safeway in Aurora at midnight in four days. If you don’t come, we will assume you don’t want to have a relationship with Adrianna. Vivianna will not be there. Don’t bring the authorities. We will know if you contact them. If you do, this won’t end well. It’s your choice, Princeton. We’ll see you then, or we won’t. Sincerely, Hades Gray.” Alastor glances up at me. “Why the fuck are you so nice?” My phone buzzes, and his eyes go wide. “Shit, he messaged back.”

“I’m being nice because he’s a psychopath and setting him off will make him unpredictable. We need to act like we’re trying to be friends with him.” I reach forward, snatching my phone from his grip. “He says, ‘Who is Vivianna?’”

I sigh as I reply, *Vale Finley.*

*Princeton: Why are you calling her Vivianna? Vale doesn’t have any family. And who the fuck are you?*

“Vale?” Kennedy asks, confused.

“She changed her name.” It’s something I didn’t feel the need to tell the guys, because she wasn’t going to be Vale forever. She was just hiding from reality.

Alastor barks out a laugh. “Fucking Viv.”

“Don’t be mad at her. She tried to be a different person. In her mind, we were all dead,” I grumble, staring down at the message.

Alastor frowns, shaking his head.

My fingers fly across the keys as I type out a message.

*Me: Vale never existed. There is no birth record of Vale Finley. Vivianna Finch exists, and Vivianna has family, and we all know what you’ve done to her. The bruises speak for themselves. Her family isn’t too happy, but we’re willing to give you a chance, for Adrianna’s sake. See you in four days.*

*Princeton: Did she tell you she came after me with a knife?*

I smirk. *Of course, she did. My little butterfly is a little crazy beneath her pretty colors and soft wings.*

*Me: I’m sure you deserved it. See you in four days.*

I click off the screen, pocketing my phone. I’m not going to get into a bitching match with the ex. He’s not worth my time.

“We’ll have to do something to distract Vivianna so we can get out of here. She’s going to be curious where we’re going that late at night,” Alastor grumbles, just as the back sliding door opens.

We all glance over our shoulder at the same time, seeing Vivianna standing there.

Fucking hell, she looks so beautiful. Her big green eyes are squinting, sleep still heavy in them, though they glimmer off the morning sun rising over the horizon. Her blonde hair lays in messy tangles around her shoulders. She’s just… *everything.*

“Distract me from what?” she says with narrowed eyes as she stares at her brother.

His face blanks out. “Quit being nosy.”

She steps outside, closing the screen door behind her. “I don’t need to be nosy when your obnoxious, loud voice carries through a closed door.” She walks up to the table, her short shorts dangerously close to showing off the curve of her ass.

I growl, giving my boys the side-eye, though they keep their eyes obviously averted from anywhere near her waist.

My hand snaps out, curling around her hipbone, giving it a squeeze. “It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

She looks down at me, the morning shadows curling around her slender features. Her eyes shine through the shadows, bright green.

“You know I’m going to find out eventually.”

That’s my fear. I know she will.

The guys are silent to the point she tilts her head to the side, clear to the fact we are hiding something from her.

Her eyes lift to Brennan. “Tell me,” she clips.

He barks out a laugh, turning his eyes away from her. “Nope. Sorry, Villain.”

“Kennedy?” she barks. “Don’t keep secrets from me.”

He pulls out his phone and mumbles something about calling his mom back as he shoves the chair back, walking around the side of the house.

Though, I know his mom died when he was a kid. Thankfully, Vivianna doesn’t know that.

Finally, she turns her gaze to Liam. “Liam? Don’t do this to me.”

He watches her closely. Carefully. With a heavy sigh, he turns toward her brother. “She’s an inquisitive one.”

Alastor brings his cigarette to his lips, pulling in a drag. Exhaling a stream of smoke between lips that look like his sister’s, he mumbles, “I don’t think we should say a fucking word.”

Vivianna’s fingers trail out, her nails clutching the back of my neck. She leans down, her lips brushing the shell of my ear. “I dare you to keep a secret from me. I dare you, Hades.”

I look up at her, nudging her face away. Spearing her with a deadly look, my jaw clenches until pain shoots to my ear. “We’ve called Princeton here.” I nudge her phone to the edge of the table. “He’ll be here in four days.”

As if the mountains became consumed by a blizzard, the air turns arctic. Though, the temperature hasn’t changed at all, it’s just the butterfly standing before me, able to change the world with her emotions.

“Fuck,” Alastor whispers, watching his sister become a different person.

The same girl I’ve been watching for the past five years.

Cold, disassociated from even being a human. She hides within this shell of herself, pretending to be strong and fierce and unable to feel the pain of everything she has gone through.

This isn’t Vivianna.

This is Vale.

Her eyes are cold, not the warm green, but a cold moss which you don’t want to fall into. Her body is coiled tight, a viper ready to attack.

“I’m leaving.” She steps away from me, but I’m quick to wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my side.

“No, the fuck you aren’t,” I growl. “You aren’t going anywhere near him, and neither is Adrianna.”

She whips her head back and forth. “No. I don’t want to be on the same planet as him. Being in the same state is too fucking much. I need to get out of here before he comes here.”

“You don’t need to worry, Viv. We aren’t going to let anything happen to you,” Alastor snaps. “Quit freaking out.”

She narrows her eyes at him. “You try laying on the ground with someone twice your size, his hands around your neck as you watched your life flash behind your eyes. He’s a monster. I just want to forget he ever existed.”

Silence fills the space between our small circle, and my grip on her lessens, becoming more comforting. She needs to know she’s safe.

With us.

With me.

“Let us take care of it,” I mumble, looking up at her.

Her breathing is erratic. She’s nervous. Scared. And I hate that she feels this way.

Her face twists in displeasure. “A part of me wants to be there. I want to be the one to end it.”

“Absolutely fucking not,” I clip, my head shaking. “You aren’t going near him. I had to watch that shit for years. You don’t need to breathe the same space as him ever again.”

“It’s not that I want to, Hades. It’s that I feel like I *deserve* to end this. Full circle.”

“It’s not happening,” Alastor chimes in, flicking the cherry of his cigarette into the distance. “I never met the guy, but I can already tell you it’s not going to be a good fucking introduction. You don’t need to be there.”

This time when she pulls away, I allow her the space. She needs it, and to be honest, my irritation is growing. My fingers twitching.

I fucking hate that guy.

“Well, I guess I have four days to decide.” She shrugs her shoulders, as if she’s the one in charge.

“Four days to decide what you’ll be doing when we go see him,” I grumble.

She barks out a laugh, heading back toward the door. “No. Four days to decide if I’ll be the one to end Princeton, or if our last meeting was enough for me.”

It was enough. It had to have been enough.

“It’ll never be enough,” she mumbles, as if she could read my thoughts. “The pain he put me through will never be enough. Just as you did, Hades, Princeton gave me scars which may never heal. Though his left bruises, as well.”

She turns around, walking back inside without another word.

“I’m about to make a fucking deep red portrait across Colorado with his blood,” Alastor seethes.

“Wildlife will take care of him,” Kennedy suggests with a casual shrug.

I shake my head. “No. We’re going to make him suffer. Painfully so.”

And I will. I may not be able to take away the bruises or pain Vivianna has endured, but I will get her retribution. Somehow, someway, I’ll make him pay for every ounce of pain he’s ever doled out on my little butterfly.

And he’ll watch from the grave as I help her soar, bruises and all.

# Chapter Three

## Vivianna

I

whip my head up, the towel wrapped tightly around my damp, blonde locks. My skin is tinged pink from the burning water I stood under until it turned ice cold.

It was a discomfort, but I needed the burn. The hint of pain to cleanse me of my past. The moment you step out of the shower, it seems as if the negative energy floats away with the steam of the shower.

I’m not healed, but I certainly feel better.

Even though my mind is on a constant loop.

Princeton is coming here. To Colorado.

The thought alone brings a shiver along my heated skin. There are so many things conflicting the next idea. I want to run and hide from Princeton.

Yet I want to confront him.

A part of me will always love him, and I don’t want to tear Adrianna away from her father.

Yet someone as evil as him doesn’t deserve to raise a child who he’s only seemed half interested in anyway.

With a sigh, I lean forward, my palm wiping across the oversized mirror attached to the wall. A blurry image of me comes into view, and I can do nothing but inhale the stifled air as I stare at myself.

I look different. I feel different.

My cheekbones protrude, and my jawline is sharper than it used to be. My big, green eyes are even larger on my slender face.

I’ve lost weight, when I didn’t have much to lose.

From weighing myself this morning, I’ve lost thirty pounds since I found out Princeton cheated one me the first time. A large inhale shows the curvature of my rib cage, my shoulder blades making an appearance with certain movements.

With a shake of my head, I turn around, grabbing the dark blue towel hanging over the shower and wrapping it around my midsection. I tuck the corner underneath my arms and head to the door, unlocking it and darting across the hallway and into the guest bedroom.

I’m grateful Alastor allowed us to stay with him for the short term, though there’s still this level of awkwardness after not having seen your brother for many years.

And the last time I saw him, he was high on heroin and kicked me out as he stood over his dead girlfriend.

I shiver, never able to get the visual of JC out of my mind. I’ve seen a lot over the years, but seeing someone so… dead, eyes wide open with a needle in their arm is a different type of death.

It’s tragic.

I shut the door quietly behind me, dropping the towel and grabbing a pair of worn-out sweats and a shirt, tugging them over my still damp body. I leave the towel wrapped in my hair as I step back into the hallway, a smirk tugging at my lips when I hear Adrianna’s high-pitched giggle.

Turning the corner, I pause in my step, my heart pounding against my chest.

Every butterfly inside of me erratically flaps its wings.

My ovaries sing.

My heart breaks a little.

Hades is surrounded by one of many baby dolls. They are Adrianna’s favorite. I only grabbed a few, and I have no idea where the rest appeared from, but it seems Alastor’s living room has turned into the toy section at Target.

There’s a small plastic bed, a baby stroller, a play bottle and food, piles of clothes, and way too many babies to count.

And Hades is currently holding a baby over his shoulder, albeit a little awkwardly as he pats it’s back with his tattooed hand, rippling chest on display, making obnoxious burping noises.

Every time he makes a burping noise, Adrianna lets out a full belly giggle, her small hands slamming against her pajama-covered thighs.

I can’t help the small chuckle that rises from my chest, and Hades looks over at me, a calmness in his gaze.

The guys left a short while ago, and Alastor had to run into his job—apparently, he’s a mechanic now. I needed to wash off the long drive and trauma, and Hades offered to watch Adrianna while I cleaned up.

I thought he’d be like Princeton. Making sure Adrianna didn’t have any near-death experiences while doing his own thing. I never imagined he’d set his time aside to play with my daughter, who isn’t even his own.

But he is, and it’s making me melt into a puddle at my feet.

Adrianna barely even notices me, too focused on Hades. He stares at me with a heavy look, and Adrianna grows irritated, stepping between his thighs and slamming her hand against the baby’s back. “Burp!”

He chuckles, turning his gaze to hers, “I’ll keep going, baby girl.”

She beams at him, and my heart soars across the universe.

“Where’d all these babies come from?” I ask softly, stepping into the living room. Gently, I settle onto the cushion next to him, watching as he takes the baby off his shoulder and cradles it into his arm. Adrianna instantly passes him a plastic bottle, and he puts it up to the baby’s mouth, pretending to feed her.

Adrianna hums. “Yummy milk.”

He nods with a smile. “It is, isn’t it?” Turning toward me, he murmurs, “We may have had an Amazon Prime delivery.”

My eyes widen. “With what, everything they had in stock?” I feel slightly embarrassed. Yes, I have some cash on me that we pulled out when we left California, but I have no job, nothing incoming. I’m poor, and it takes me back to arriving at Carnival de Morte with only the cash in my pocket.

I hate feeling helpless.

Keeping the baby clutched in his arms, he leans toward me, his arm going around my waist. “Don’t feel any type of way about it, Vivianna. You may as well get used to it. This is the type of shit we have been wanting to do for years, but we gave you your space.”

I battle between wanting to curl into him and wanting to shy away from him. Being taken care of is something I haven’t had in years. I almost forgot what it was like to feel as if someone cared.

A burning starts behind my eyes, and I blink away the tears as I avert them.

Hades doesn’t allow the disconnect. He forgets about the baby in his arms as his hand reaches out, his fingers curling around my chin. He holds me tightly, pinching my skin as he holds my gaze.

“Don’t hide from me.”

The nail of his thumb caresses the skin below my lower lip, ever so slightly.

“I’m not hiding,” I whisper, even though that’s exactly what I’m doing.

“I’m making up for time. You’re mine. Let go, Vivianna. Where was the girl who held on to the aerial silks and truly *let go*?”

My eyes heat, slightly narrow. “She died in the fire. She died in the dirt as she was pinned to the ground. She died with hands around her throat. She is *dead*, Hades.” I pull myself out of his grip, the lack of control causing the weight in my chest.

Losing control leaves me too vulnerable.

I’ve been vulnerable for too fucking long.

“She’s not dead,” he growls, narrowing his eyes. His hand drops to his lap, and I know he wants to grip me, take control, but Adrianna is steps away, and somehow, he has more respect for her than her own father does. “You’re more alive than ever. You just hide from yourself. What happened to the girl from the night before? Who cried in her closet and felt free?”

I do feel free. The release was just what I needed, but that release was one of many.

The trauma runs deep, and there are many scars, not just one.

“She’s not dead,” I confess. “But she’s not the same girl.”

“It’s called transformation. We’re never the same as we began, but it’s how beautiful you are at the end. And I can see how fucking magnificent you are, Vivianna. Don’t hide your colors, or your pain.” His hand falls to my side, where my scars lie. The scars he had a hand in. “Don’t hide your scars. They are what make you, *you.*”

My heart rate speeds up, and I can barely breathe as my mouth opens, a gasp slipping past my lips.

Hades tears down my walls, revealing my raw wounds to the fresh, painful air.

It’s too much.

He knows how to reach into the deepest depths of my soul and expose them. He knows me too much. He can see my pain as if it’s his own pain. He scrapes past the scabs and scars and demands healing.

He penetrates my impenetrable walls.

*No.*

I shove off the couch, walking out of the living room without another word, darting into the guest bedroom. I can hear Hades mumble to Adrianna, and then cartoons switching onto the TV.

*Don’t follow me.* I don’t want to face it all. There’s too much baggage. There is too much pain in the old wounds.

I shut the door, holding on to the knob and wishing there was a lock on it. There isn’t, and I’m stuck, the cool metal instantly turning warm beneath my grip.

The moment I feel resistance against the knob, I tighten my grip, a growl twisting at my lips.

“Leave me alone, Hades. I want to be alone right now.”

He laughs, a deep rumble from the other side. “Because you want to hide. *Quit hiding*,” he snaps.

My fingers tighten around the knob, my knuckles turning white. “I’m not hiding!” I shout, my free hand going to the towel around my head. I tug it off, dropping the damp fabric at my feet. My fingers go into my knotted hair, pulling at the strands. “I just need to *breathe*!”

No matter how many breaths I take, no matter how deeply I inhale, there is never enough air entering my lungs.

“You can breathe easier when you lift the weight of trauma off your fucking chest.” His voice is muffled, yet close. As if he’s leaned in, his lips which I love so much pressing against the dark wood.

“Just go away,” I sigh, a whimper scraping against my throat. I lean forward as well, my forehead knocking against the door. I can feel him on the other side. So close, yet so far away.

I should let him in, though I don’t know how. Every time someone is let in, I only get hurt in the end.

He’s silent for a moment, and I think he’s about to step away, when the knob easily turns, and he steps in, all six feet, tall, brooding man of him. My fight is nonexistent when it comes to Hades.

My feet immediately backtrack, shuffling backward as I make my way toward the bed. He instantly follows, leering, ominous in his heavy steps. He should be wearing armor, not a pair of black sweats with no shirt, his tattoos on display for the entire world.

I want to breathe him in, touch every inch of his skin, feel the electricity which is always present between us.

Yet I also want to hide from confronting the darkness that weighs on my shoulders and on my soul.

*Which path should I take?*

I should break down my walls, but instead… *I run.*

I spin around, making my way to the side of the bed. Hades doesn’t want to play the game, instantly coming up to me until he’s cornered me in between the bed and the wall.

“Quit running. I’ve spent years chasing you,” he growls, his face twisting in pain. “Stop it, Vivianna.”

“I’m not running,” I whimper. “Not from you, at least.”

“We can’t be *us* when you aren’t *you*.”

The truest words I’ve ever heard.

I don’t even know who I am anymore.

My mouth opens, an exhausted sigh escaping.

He shakes his head, his hands swooping down and curling behind my thighs. He lifts me into his arms, dropping my back onto the bed. My body gives a small bounce, and Hades is quick as he looms over me, his hands going into fists on either side of the bed. The mattress dips, his dark, heavy presence consuming me.

He brings a hand to my neck, his fingers spanning across my skin, slowing rising until he tilts my chin up, giving him easy access to the slender column of my throat.

“Your blood pumps madly through your veins when I’m nearby. I can see it.” His thumb presses against my artery. “I can feel it.”

“You know how you affect me,” I whisper.

“Mmm,” he hums, dragging his hand down to my breast, directly over my heart. A warmth fills me, his heat and my own creating a fire between us. I whimper, feeling our hearts in sync. “It’s okay to feel pain, as long as you allow me to experience the pain with you. Let me relieve you of the ache.”

My eyes settle closed, wishing so badly the pain wouldn’t battle with the need. I want him to fix me, yet I don’t even know where the repair would begin. I just know the instant his fingers touch me, I’m a puddle beneath him.

His fingers leave my breast, yet I can feel the warmth that lingers into my skin, heating my veins. I whimper at the loss as he shoves off the bed, looking down at me with a heavy glance. “Stay where you are. Don’t move.” He walks to the door, glancing over his shoulder at me at the last moment. “Remember what happened last time you moved when you were told to stay put.”

A chill runs along my skin thinking of his room at Carnival de Morte, as I arched into his touch. How he gave me a red backside and my skin tingled for hours afterward.

Perhaps a little out of the moment to turn my trauma into seduction, but he knows how to reel me back into the present, into the *now*. Only Hades has the capability to calm the chaos raging beneath my skin.

He disappears out of the room, and I exhale a shaky breath, my fingers clutching the sheets on either side of me.

*Don’t move*, he tells me.

Yet I’m eager and too curious to sit still.

I slide off the bed, my toes pressing gently against the floor as I move across the bedroom. The door was left ajar, and I tilt my body sideways as I slip between the door and the frame, tiptoeing into the hallway. I head into the living room, my spine against the wall as I peek my head around the corner.

*My fucking heart.*

My chest seizes as I stare at Hades, leaning over the couch as he lifts up a sleeping Adrianna into his arms. Her legs flop bonelessly against his arms as he shifts her into a more comfortable position. He’s gentle as he rolls her against his chest, grabbing her blanket and draping it over her. The moment it hits her body, she curls up into a ball, snuggling against his chest.

He smirks down at her, dangerously dark and so fucking handsome, my toes curl against the wooden floor. He straightens up, and I snap back around the corner, leaping across the hallway and sliding back into the guest bedroom.

His footsteps creak along the hallway as he makes his way into the other bedroom Alastor designated for Adrianna. The moment he steps through the doorway, I’m back into the hallway, looking fucking ridiculous as I move like a cartoon character tiptoeing down the hallway.

A princess castle nightlight is on in the corner of the room—all decorated with things Alastor apparently bought before they came out to California to get me.

Hades lays her down on the simple, white wooden twin bed, covered in princess-themed covers. He pulls the comforter back, maneuvering her with ease as he slips her under the sheets.

Pulling them up to her chin, he makes sure she’s tucked in perfectly.

And then he leans down, pressing his lips against her forehead, his fingers moving forward and brushing the stray locks away from her cheek.

I can’t help the whimper that escapes my throat.

Hades stiffens, and I leap back from the doorway, sprinting down the hall and back into the spare bedroom. I hop onto the bed, laying on my back as I resume the same position he left me in.

At least, I hope I’m in the same position he left me.

My heart hammers in my ears, and I can see the fabric of my shirt fluttering against my chest from the heavy pounding of my heartbeat.

It takes a few more minutes before I can hear the heavy, steady footsteps of Hades walking down the hall.

They are controlled, calculated, as if he knows I can hear them and what they do to me.

He’s purposely torturing me.

The door creaks as he pushes it open, and I keep my gaze locked on the popcorn ceiling, my fingers tingling in anticipation.

No sound is made, and I can’t take it anymore as I tilt my head up, my eyes locking with his as I watch him lean against the frame of the door.

“Your footsteps don’t need to creak on the loose floorboards for me to know you’re close. I don’t need to smell your light, floral scent fluttering through the hallway to know you didn’t listen to my command.” He steps into the room, and my breathing picks up as I swallow down my dry, suddenly aching throat.

His movements are slow as he walks toward the foot of the bed.

“I don’t need eyes to see the whisps of your blonde hair fluttering around the corner of the room.” Leaning forward, his fingers wrap around my ankle, his grip tight.

“I could feel the pounding of your heart from miles away.” His fingers lighten, tracing along my skin, goosebumps flushing wildly up my leg. “Electricity, Vivianna. A burning, wildfire and electric currents. Once you’re close enough to me, my heart knows.”

My sinuses burn with need and desperation for him when his lips quirk in a salacious smirk.

“Plus, I did not leave you in this position, little butterfly.” With a quick tug, my body jolts, my legs going to the opposite side of the bed.

*Oh, yeah. Shit.*

I draw my legs up, out of his reach. “I was curious.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he murmurs, leaning forward with narrowed eyes. “Or maybe just gave her a red ass.” He snatches both ankles in his grip, pulling me toward him. Fingers wrapping roughly around my hips, he flips me onto my stomach. A small *oomph* leaves my lips.

Pressing my hands against the mattress, I curl my fingers into the fabric as I glance over my shoulder and narrow my eyes at him.

“Don’t you dare,” I growl.

His lip quirks even higher, nearly looking maniacal.

*Crack.*

My back arches as my backside turns to fire when his palm leaves my skin

“I’ll do what I want when it comes to you, butterfly. You are mine now. You’ve always been mine.” He flips me onto my back, my skin instantly cooling against the sheets.

I gasp up at him, torn between wanting to fight for control and abolish any and all control I desire to have.

“Take your pants off,” he commands.

I reach down, pulling my pants over my waist and kicking them off my ankles. They fall over the side of the bed. I press my thighs together, the ache already intensifying with each passing second.

“Spread your legs,” he growls, standing up straight. My eyes drop to his sweats, seeing the growing erection pushing at the front of his pants.

My knees fall open, my damp folds making an appearance.

He lets out a hiss between his teeth, and I watch as his pants twitch in pleasure.

“I want to watch you,” I gasp. “Touch yourself.”

His eyes narrow. “You aren’t in charge.”

I swallow down my nerves, control roaring through my veins. “You could let me… take charge.” My hand drops to the apex of my thighs, and I press my middle finger against my clit. My hips jolt slightly, and I watch as his eyes darken into black orbs.

He barks a laugh, showing his teeth, before a darkness comes over him, and all emotion drains from his face. “Don’t,” he clips.

My head tilts to the side, my hair fanning around my head. I’m heading into dark waters with my brazen attitude. “Don’t… what?”

His body slowly coils tight, his lips pressing into a thin line. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

I’m not quite sure where the balls are coming from, but I like testing him.

He may benefit from releasing a little bit of that control that has him trapped so tightly.

“I like games,” I rasp.

His fists clench tightly at his sides as I spread my legs wider, diving my hand down and slipping my pointer and middle fingers deep inside me, feeling wet heat.

I can feel the rumble breaking from his chest before I can hear it.

My eyes narrow. “Don’t you like my game?” I ask innocently, batting my eyelashes at him. “After all, if I’m a butterfly, shouldn’t I be… free?”

He pounces. As if the pin is pulled from the bomb and any remaining restraint he had, simply vanished.

With a growl, my arms are wrenched above my head, his body aligning with his. The weight of his body sinks down on me, and I can’t help the moan that rips from my throat.

I want to control, but he slips it from my fingers like silk.

He drags my wrists together, holding them tightly with one of his hands. His other hand drags through my hair, caressing my cheek until his thumb hits my lip. He pulls it down, my mouth slipping open. “Your games are trouble. We can certainly play a game, though, if you’d like. Would you like to know the rules?”

I swallow, my tongue scraping against the rough pad of his thumb. “It sounds dangerous.”

He smiles down at me, the shadows around his features sharpening his face, looking vicious and positively deadly.

“You be a good girl and behave, and I’ll make you come so hard you’ll be dripping down your thighs.”

My throat goes dry, all the moisture in my body pooling between my legs.

Giving up control feels like an impossible feat, but Hades always knows how to make the impossible possible.

“Tell me you agree to my terms, Vivianna.” The words roll off his tongue crisp and precise. It makes my thighs twitch.

“I agree,” I breathe.

A slow smile pulls at his lips, sharp teeth shining down at me. One wrong move and it looks as if he may take a bite out of me.

I may let him.

Releasing my wrists, he shoves himself off the bed, standing at the edge as he stares down at me. “Spread those legs for me.”

A trembling breath slips from my chest as my knees fall open. Raw air hits my damp sex, and I watch as Hades’s eyes darken into black pools. It feels so erotic I want to reach forward and press my fingers against my clit.

My clasped fingers clench instead.

His eyes rove from mine, down my body, his nostrils flaring as he takes in every inch of my body. “Tell me whose pussy this is,” he rasps.

*Lord, have mercy.*

“It’s yours,” I whimper.

He lets out a simple nod. “Good girl. Now touch my pussy for me.”

I unlace my fingers, my knuckles throbbing from the tense grip. I drop my hand between my legs, my fingers slipping between my folds. I instantly find myself drenched, and it only makes me more aroused. I press my middle finger against my clit, my hips jolting off the bed.

“It won’t take much to get you dripping, will it?” he rasps, and I can feel his knees as they brush against the soles of my feet. He’s holding himself back, and I can feel his restraint thicken the air.

It’s hard to breathe.

“Did you miss me, butterfly?”

My eyes slide to his, and I see so many emotions running through them.

Happiness, pain, anger, maybe a little bit of resentment.

But the heaviest emotion is love.

*Love.*

“I missed you so much,” I whimper, swiping my fingers against my clit. Worry hits me as I stare at him, his mysterious eyes holding too many words. “Did you miss me?”

He cocks his head to the side. “Vivianna, I was the one who had to stand by while you gave your heart to another man. I’m the one who had to watch as you birthed another man’s child. Do you think I didn’t miss you every time I saw you with a smile on your face? Do you really believe every time you walked into your house at night with *him,* those lights going off in your house as you settled in as a family, while I stood alone, that I didn’t *miss you*?” His entire demeanor darkens, a slip of seduction suctioning from the room, and in its place is so much heaviness and regret clouding the space.

A cry breaks free, and I barely register it’s coming from me.

His features distort behind my tears, my hand falling from my sex.

“Put your hand back,” he growls.

My hand flies forward, not applying pressure, but lying dormant between the crux of my thighs. “You’re upset,” I whisper.

He leans forward, his jaw clenched so tightly I wonder how his teeth haven’t shattered. “You’re goddamn right I’m mad. I’m fucking furious with you, Vivianna.” He shakes his head, his eyes squeezing shut briefly. When he opens them, a fraction of fury has fled his gaze. “I understand why you fled, Vivianna, but it still hurts to know even for a moment in time, you opened up your heart to someone else.” His hand reaches down, his fingers circling my bare ankle. “When it was never yours to give away.”

“It was yours. It’s always been yours,” I say with sincerity. I’ve never meant more of the truth.

He nods, releasing my ankle as he stands up straight. “Your heart is mine, Viv. Don’t forget it ever again. I won’t let you go next time.”

I don’t want him to.

He steps back, his hands going to the waistband of his sweats. “I won’t let you forget.”

With that, he drops his pants, his erection bobbing free. So hard, a tense vein runs along the underside, all the way to the head, which has a dollop of precum beading at the tip. My mouth waters, eager to taste him, but I hold myself back, my fingers curling between the folds of my sex. Slippery silk against dainty fingers, I inhale a heady breath and smell as my arousal fills the room.

*That feels good.*

“Now show me who you belong to.” He nods his head toward his cock. “Get on your knees.”

My hands go to the mattress, and I shove myself off the end of the bed, dropping down in front of him. My hands go to my bare thighs, and I tilt my head back, looking up at him.

He stares down at me with heated, wanting eyes. “Show me you’re mine.”

His hand goes to the back of my head, his fingers curling in the back of my neck as he pulls me forward. My lips pop open, and I tilt forward, sucking him into my mouth, until the tip of his erection hits the back of my throat.

He growls, low in his throat.

I lean back, my eyes tilting up to him as I start a fast bob, each pull sucking him deep into my throat. A moan slips from my lips as I stare at him, watching the desire swirl in his dark eyes. Saliva pools into my mouth, dripping along the corners of my lips, drenching his skin.

“Spit on my cock.”

My hand goes to the base of his erection, gripping him tightly as I pull him from my mouth. I spit on the tip, dragging my hand up and spreading it around his silky skin. He pulses in my grip at the same moment my sex thumps with need.

The energy crackles, sparks with so much tension my skin grows damp with sweat. It trickles down the back of my neck.

His fingers tighten in my hair, pulling my head forward. I twist my hand, squeezing tight as I bring my lips around him.

His head tilts back, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he groans loudly. “You know just what I like, butterfly.”

His other hand goes forward, dragging along my jaw before his fingers wrap around my throat.

He’s got me in a tight hold, and he thrusts forward. And again.

*And again.*

I kneel helplessly as he fucks my mouth ruthlessly. I don’t dare drag my eyes away from him as he pulls his head down, watching me with a snarl on his face.

“Mine,” he growls. “All mine.”

I pull my head back until his erection springs free. Saliva drips from my mouth to his cock. “Yours,” I whimper before diving back down, sucking him in deep, messy, eager, hungry.

My jaw aches as he ruthlessly fucks my mouth, punishing me for hurting him. I groan, the vibrations making him grow impossibly harder. It borders on pain, my eyes watering as I stare him in the eyes. He gazes down at me with a mixture of intoxication and awe.

I take everything he gives me, because I love him. Because I’m his. Because even though I did what I thought was right at the time, I hurt the man I love.

And I want to please him.

He gnashes his teeth together as he pulls my hair back, ripping himself from my mouth. With his other hand around my neck, he pulls me up, dragging me forward until we’re barely an inch apart.

Panting breaths slip from my lips, his chest heaving as we stare at one another.

The air swirls around us, my skin buzzing from the energy between radiating between our bodies.

It’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt, and it only happens with Hades.

We’re bound with our souls.

He pulls me forward the last inch until our lips clash together, teeth and lips and so much love. So much hurt between us, so much healing to be done.

But I know it can be done, only with him.

I whimper into his mouth, my hands going forward and gripping his shoulders. Our tongues duel with one another as we stand at the edge of the bed. His fingers tighten around my throat, dragging up to my jaw, digging into my skin before pulling back, all the while his eyes stare down at me.

My breaths are shaky, my hand falling to his tattooed fingers, gripping him tightly.

“I’ll always be yours,” I whisper.

His eyes darken. “I know, baby girl.” He pushes me, the backs of my thighs hitting the mattress. I fall to my butt, staring up at him.

“Get on the bed. On your back,” he orders.

I scoot back, laying on the center of the bed, my head against the pillow with my hair fanning around me.

“Take your shirt off,” he says. His dark hair falls to the sides, and he brings his hand up, dragging his fingers through it.

He’s so damn attractive.

I lean up, grabbing the hem of my shirt and pulling it over my head. Braless, I lay back down, goosebumps popping along my skin as he stares at me.

Then he steps forward, a wash of heat coming with him as he gets on the bed, tattooed, corded, and dangerous as he prowls toward me.

He grips my thighs, pulling them apart with a quick tug as he settles between them.

My back arches automatically, so needy for him. My insides twist with the need to be filled by him.

He looks down at me, his hair falling to the side of his face. “I’m in control, Vivianna. Remember that. You. Are. Not.”

With that, he pulls me roughly toward him, until the backs of my thighs hit his hips. Lining himself up, he slides in, and I see stars.

“Oh!” I cry out, my hands going forward and gripping his biceps. My fingernails drag down his skin, and he allows it for only a moment before he tears my hands off him, leaning forward and pinning them above his head.

He slams into me, and my body jolts against the mattress.

He thrusts again, my body scooting up the bed with each thrust. He looks down at me, our lips barely kissing as we are at each other.

It’s erotic. The emotions build in my chest, and I swallow them down, the blood in my veins warming until I feel as if I’m on fire.

Hades is the fire that lights my soul.

My head tilts back, my eyes rolling in the back of my head as pleasure overtakes me.

“Look at me, butterfly,” he rasps.

I pull my gaze up to his, our eyes locking.

“Don’t let go.”

I swallow, letting out a small nod.

He leans up on his knees, pulling my legs from around his waist. He lifts them into the air, gripping my ankles with one hand as he presses my legs against my chest, my feet up by my head.

And he sinks in deep.

We moan together as he leans against my legs, stretching me as he slides deeper than ever. I feel like I can feel him in my throat. In my heart. In every inch of my soul.

His head dives down, his teeth sinking against my throat. I let out a cry as he speeds up his thrusts, the sound of our wet skin slapping audible.

Heat pools in the pit of my stomach, and just as I can feel myself tipping over the edge, he pulls out of me, causing a cry to rip from my throat.

He looks at me with a heavy look as he grabs my hips, flipping me over, pulling me up onto my knees.

*Crack.*

His palm lands against my left cheek, fire rippling up my skin. My body shudders, and I can feel my arousal drip down my thigh.

His fingers dig between them, sliding deep into my sex. They curl forward, and my body bucks against his hand. My fingers dig into the pillow in front of me, a guttural moan ripping from my throat as he works me toward an orgasm.

My body coils tight, my eyes nearly watering from the pleasure. I can feel the release within reach, so close I can feel my body hum.

And he pulls his digits out.

My knees give out, and I fall onto my stomach with a cry. My head turns over my shoulder, and I scowl at him. “You’re torturing me.”

He grunts. “You tortured me for years, Vivianna. Take a few minutes of pain.”

He grabs my hips, pulling me back onto my knees. Curling his body over my back, he brings his damp fingers forward. “Now be a good girl and taste yourself.”

I stare at him, unable to refuse the man who brings me unlimited pleasure. He slips his fingers into my mouth, pressing them against my tongue. I hum around his fingers, tasting exactly how he makes me feel.

Blissful.

Sliding his fingers out, he drags his hands down my body, and I whimper as electricity crackles along my skin.

*Crack.*

My body arches, my backside on fire as he runs his palm along the mark he most definitely created against my skin.

“Mine,” he growls ferociously, landing another slap against my backside as he thrusts forward, entering me so hard my body jolts forward. A scream breaks from my lips as he starts pummeling into me, our bodies rocking so roughly the bed bangs against the wall. Hades doesn’t let up, consuming every inch of my body as his hands grip my waist so tightly his fingers mark my skin.

He drops a hand forward, his warm fingers brushing against my skin until his fingers reach my clit. I jolt against him, my clit pulsing against his fingers.

He bends down, his lips pressing against my spine as he hums. “Are you going to be a good girl and come for me?”

I nod my head, some form of words leaving my mouth that don’t make any sense.

He chuckles, leaning up, though keeping his fingers where they are. “Look at me, butterfly.”

It takes effort to lift my head, glancing at him over my shoulder. I see his straight face, dark eyes half hidden behind hooded, dangerous eyes. His jaw is clenched, and he looks ruthless. He looks like he’s in control.

“Ask me to let you come. Nicely.”

I lick my dry lips, my body rippling with tension. “Please let me come.”

His eyes narrow.

“Can I please come, Daddy?” I whimper.

His lip twitches slightly, and I bite down on my tongue to stop the moan when the muscles on his tattooed chest roll with his movements.

“Good girl.”

He pinches my clit, and my body turns to stone as my orgasm violently shoots through me.

“Fuck,” I groan, tears springing to my eyes. I can feel my arousal drip down his cock, drenching our skin.

He growls low in his throat. “That’s my good girl. This is my pussy, Vivianna, don’t you ever forget it.” He chokes out the words as his own orgasm rips through him. His breath is choppy as his cock twitches inside of me as he empties himself.

Our breathing is loud in the room as we catch our breaths. Slowly, he pulls out of me, and I gasp at the loss.

Grabbing my hips, he flips me onto my back. I stare up at him as he parts my knees, spreading them wide. “Look.”

Heat creeps up my cheeks as I lift my head, my eyes darting between my thighs. My thighs are drenched, glistening with both of our fluids. He filled me up, his cum dripping from my sex.

My head falls to the bed, and I swallow audibly as I look up at him.

His narrowed eyes bore into me as he lets go of my knees. “Consider that me marking you as mine. Don’t be surprised if you end up with a collar around your neck,” he clips possessively as he slides off the bed. He switches between hot and cold, and it’s like a bucket of ice washes over me.

He’s still upset with me. No, not upset.

He’s hurt. Heartbroken.

“Hades…”

His jaw clenches. “Carving my name into your skin wouldn’t even be enough for me, Vivianna. If I ever see another man lay his finger on you, I’ll break his fucking legs. And that would be nice of me.”

With that, he swipes his sweats off the floor, pulling them on and heading out of the room. “Go to sleep, darling. I’ve got shit to do.”

“What shit?” I whisper, closing my legs and scooting up the bed.

He smirks at me over his shoulder. “Figure out how I’m going to murder your ex.”

He slips from the room, closing the door behind him, leaving me in an atmosphere thickened with emotion and sex.

I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat as I crawl underneath the sheets, my face burying into the pillow that smells like us.

Closing my eyes, I wonder if we’ll ever be healed, or if we’ll always have our pasts pitted between us.

# Chapter Four

## Hades

S

he sleeps so soundly, her pouty lips puckered gently as she clutches her worn, slightly dirty blankie. Her shirt is bunched up, the creamy skin on her belly slightly showing, inhaling deeply with every breath.

Adrianna.

The daughter that should have been mine. She should have my blood, my bones, and my skin. I want to look into her eyes and see Vivianna’s jade green eyes, with my devilish mouth. I want to see her float around like her mother does with the determined, narrowed eyes of mine as I focus.

The child in front of me should be half of each of us. I feel it in my soul this child is meant to be mine. I’ve felt the connection with her, nearly as strong as I have with her mother. Is it because it’s Vivianna’s child, or is there some soul connection with Adrianna as well?

Adrianna lets out a small snore, rousing her from her heavy sleep. She flops over on her side, her blankie tangled around her as her mouth pops open.

I love this child.

And I’m so mad at Vivianna.

I shouldn’t be. I should be proud of her for wanting to be free. But her freedom cost her, and she thought, for that split moment in time, that her freedom could be found with another love.

There is no other love, not when it comes to Vivianna and I.

I shove off the wall, grabbing the door handle and pulling it closed, leaving it only opened a crack. Heading back toward the spare bedroom, I contemplate waking up Vivianna and apologizing for being an asshole, though as I step up to the bedroom door, my phone starts buzzing in my pocket.

I sigh, pulling it out and seeing an unknown number from North Carolina. Frowning at it, I hit decline and shove it back in my pocket, only for it to start ringing once again.

“What the fuck?” I mutter under my breath, pressing my thumb rather roughly against the accept button.

“Who the hell is this?” I snap, brow furrowed as I stalk to the kitchen. Tearing the refrigerator door open for a drink, I crack open the top and guzzle down half the can.

It’s three in the morning, but why the hell not.

“Bro, it’s Derek,” comes a low, raspy voice.

I pause, the can poised against my lips as my eyes narrow. “Derek?” I ask, setting the can against the counter. “How’s it going?”

Derek is one of the guys from Carnival de Morte. I haven’t spoken to him in… years. He did magic shit that was way too real, and I never wanted to look too much into it because honestly, some of the shit was pretty fucked up.

He’s in his late thirties, decked out in head to toe in tattoos and piercings, and I’m honestly kind of thinking he was able to do half the shit he did with witchcraft or some dark magic.

Dude is cool, but I always kind of kept my distance.

“Have you heard?” he asks, his voice quiet, low.

I shake my head, the walls around me rising as hesitation and irritation fill me.

Derek’s voice is on guard. Edgy.

*Something is wrong.*

“Clearly not if you’re calling me. Cut the bullshit and tell me what’s going on.”

He chuckles, not at all turned off by my attitude. He’s known me for years, and everyone knows how I am.

“It wasn’t Borris, man.”

My body runs cold, the can crumpling in my tightening grip. My brows turn down in confusion, then dread.

“What?” I growl.

“It wasn’t Borris… who killed those girls. There’s a copycat or something. I don’t know, man, but people are dying.”

“Who? When? How?” The questions spill out of me at a rapid pace. I let go of the can, glancing down the hallway to make sure Vivianna isn’t somehow peering around the corner.

She’s not, and I instantly make my way outside, closing the door behind me.

“No one knows who it is, but it’s brutal. I don’t—” he chokes, like the stress is overtaking him. “I don’t know what to do. None of us do.”

“How many?” I ask, sitting down on one of the chairs. Digging into my pocket, I pull out a cigarette, sparking it up. The tip lights bright in the night sky. “Who’s dead?”

“Charlie. Greg. Nancy. Florence. Barry. Half of the backstage crew.”

Smoke flows quickly from my nostrils as I lean forward in my chair. “Men?” Borris never killed men.

Or was it ever Borris? Or was he just after Vivianna?

I nearly choke on air, wondering if we’ve had it wrong this entire time. Not understanding how we’ve gone all this time without any deaths, and now all these people are dead? None of it makes any sense.

“Men,” Derek confirms.

My jaw clenches, my molars cracking from the pressure. “The women? Are they attacked like before?”

Don’t say it.

He lets out a sigh. “Yeah. The women were raped. Brutally. It’s almost worse than before. We can’t figure it out.”

“And why am I just finding this out now?” I grit between my teeth.

“We’ve been trying to get ahold of you, man. You’re an impossible man to reach. Almost wondered if you were a victim and we just didn’t know about it.”

I bark out a laugh. The last thing I’ll ever be is a *victim*. “No, man.”

I can almost feel his smile through the phone. “I know, it’s why I kept trying. I just needed you to know.”

I nod, pulling in a drag. “Tell me everything you know.”

The phone crackles, like he’s shifting around in bed or something. “The victims have been all over the place, so it’s not like we can narrow down where the killer is from. There seems to be no motive or synchrony in his kills. It’s like he’s picking someone from the carnival and just attacking.”

“Only the carnival?” It could be a coincidence if there are deaths outside of the carnival.

“Only the carnival.”

*Fuck.*

I lean my head back, staring up at the stary sky, wondering how life can continuously throw shit my way and expect me to catch it.

I don’t want to deal with this bullshit. But I know, without a doubt, it’s something I have to deal with. This means not only Vivianna is in danger, but we all are.

And someone, if it wasn’t Borris, still tried to attack Vivianna in that fun house. Which means, someone still needs to die.

“How far has this gotten?”

I hear a lighter through the speaker followed by an erratic cough. “Greg lives about thirty minutes from me. He died yesterday. Cops were everywhere. Carnival de Morte… it’s out, dude. It’s out.”

*Holy shit.*

“The news? The public? They all know?” I question, not sure how to believe something like that. Borris may have been a fucking idiot, but he was quite the intelligent idiot, and whatever family line remained wouldn’t have been too keen on word about the carnival getting out to the public.

“If they don’t, they will soon. It’s spreading like wildfire.”

“Fucking hell,” I growl. Once the world knows about a killer, it’s much more difficult to kill said killer.

Another coughing fit blares through my ears as I count the stars.

“Yeah, man. I just thought I’d let you know.”

I let out a sigh. Piling the shit on top of shit, I guess. Only more things to deal with.

Whether or not Vivianna wants to admit it, she isn’t handling the Princeton stuff well. The moment Carnival de Morte comes up, or anything related to what happened to her, I know it’ll tip her over the edge. She is not going to handle this well.

“Thanks. Keep me updated if you hear anything else.” Pulling the phone away from my ear, I hit the end button and drop my phone onto the wooden table with a loud clatter. “Fucking hell,” I snap, tossing the half-smoked cigarette to the side, and rub my hands down my face.

What the hell am I going to do? And how am I going to keep Vivianna and Adrianna safe?

How am I going to keep Vivianna from tipping over the edge?

“Shit,” I clip, grabbing my phone.

I start dialing the guys, yet none of them answer. It doesn’t stop me, and I keep trying for the next ten minutes until Kennedy picks up his phone.

“I’m trying to sleep,” he growls.

“Not tonight. Get the guys and get over here.”

“What?” He’s still half asleep, his words raspy and slurred.

“Guzzle down a glass of water and sober your ass up. Get over here. It’s important. Get the guys, too.”

“What’s wrong?” Slowly, his voice becomes clearer. His mattress creaks, and I imagine him getting up, wiping the sleep from his face. “Is something wrong with Villain or the kid?”

“No,” I snap. “I’ll tell you when you get here. Just… *fucking get here*.” I end the call, slipping my phone into my pocket, and shove off the chair. The air is chilly tonight, but with the news from Derek, my skin feels icy cold.

“Fuck,” I mutter, walking back in the house as quietly as I can. I head to the living room, sitting down on the couch and grabbing the remote from the coffee table, right in between two baby dolls.

*Shit.*

How the hell am I supposed to protect Vivianna? Adrianna can’t lose her.

The thought alone makes my lungs seize up.

I slouch back on the couch, surrounded by toddler toys as I flick on the news.

My eyes go wide at what’s televised.

Underground carnival in red, bold letters at the bottom of the screen as a news reporter stands on the corner of the street. I mute the TV, turning on the subtitles, and read the words.

*Underground carnival known as Carnival de Morte somehow escaped law enforcement and the public for years, traveling around the country sight unseen. The ringleader of the carnival, Borris Noel, died tragically five years ago. While the underground carnival may have gone unnoticed, the details are slowly emerging and what we are finding out is shocking us all.*

*Death, madness, and destruction all secretly held underneath a red-and-black tent. Murderers, felons, and criminals of all types working at the carnival while only VIP members were given access to these shows.*

*Law enforcement and the FBI are slowly uncovering details, but what we’re learning now is only just the beginning. It appears a string of murders across the country have been linked to the carnival. Brutal slayings of individuals who have been working at the carnival over the years and are now finding a gruesome ending at the hands of this mysterious murderer. As more facts are revealed, we will be sure to report them. It is advised that there is no threat to the public, but anyone who may have involvement with Carnival de Morte is urged to call the number at the bottom of the screen.*

The newscaster steps back, her microphone falling to her side. She looks a little pale, and I suddenly wonder how brutal the killing was in the house behind her, encased in yellow police tape.

I don’t know how long I stare at the TV when the front door opens, heavy footsteps pounding around the corner. I don’t glance up from the screen as multiple shadows fall around me.

“What’s going on?” Alastor asks. I peer around my shoulder, seeing him in his mechanics clothes. I don’t know where he was tonight, and honestly, I don’t have the energy to ask.

“What the fuck is that?” Brennan asks, pointing to the TV. I turn back to the screen, sitting silently as I watch them replay multiple clips over and over. Neighbors and relatives of Greg tell whatever story has been fabricated, spitting bullshit about what a good person he was and how he shouldn’t have died so tragically.

“Holy shit. Greg died?” Liam whispers, shaking his head.

Greg sold drugs to minors, who eventually overdosed. Greg is, and always was, a piece of shit.

Toys fall to the ground as the guys shove them out of the way. The cushions shift as they sit down, and we all sit in silence, coming to the realization that life is about to come crashing down around us.

Whatever we thought we knew about Carnival de Morte, Borris, and everyone involved wasn’t even close to the truth.

Borris wasn’t the killer.

Or… he was working with someone.

My blood runs cold, and a sigh leaves me as the screen blurs in a loop.

And as my bones coil tight with tension, I realize whatever shit we’ve all gone through in our lives, it was only the beginning. A prelude.

We’re about to step into hell.

# Chapter Five

## Vivianna

D

o you ever wake up with that twitching feeling in your chest, knowing something isn’t right? Have you ever felt before you open your eyes, before your limbs move for the first time of the day, that your life is about to change?

That’s how I feel this morning.

As my eyes crack open, and the sun warms my skin through the windows, I can already feel the heaviness in the air. It’s thick in the way it weighs my limbs against the mattress, and I have the strongest urge to roll over, pulling the blankets over my head and pretend the day doesn’t exist.

But that isn’t a possibility. Not when my bladder is thumping in discomfort.

I squeeze my thighs together, though it shifts lower, a heavy ache settling into the pit of my stomach.

I can’t wait.

With a groan, I tear the blankets off my body, slipping my legs over the side of the bed. It’s only then do I frown, glancing over at the other side of the bed.

*Where is Hades?*

My eyes narrow, unease settling even heavier into me as I make my way across the room. I’m hesitant to place my hands on the doorknob, but my protesting bladder speaks otherwise. Pulling the door open, I race across the hall and into the bathroom.

Once I’m finished, my curiosity and nervousness only heighten, to the point a cold sweat breaks out beneath my shirt.

I run my hands against my hips as I step into the hall and make my way toward the kitchen.

Upon entering the living room, I pause in my step, my eyes landing on five grown men passed out in various positions.

Hades sits in the center of the couch, his head cocked back awkwardly. Kennedy sits on one side of him, while Liam sits on the other. Liam has his head on the armrest, a small snore breaking from his chest.

Alastor and Brennan are passed out on the ground, surrounded by girly toys, and I’d almost laugh at the sight, except my eyes flit to the screen, my entire body turning to stone.

“What. The. Fuck?” My voice cracks, breaks halfway through my words as fear clutches me in a terrifying, painful hold. “What the hell?” I cry out, my palm going to my mouth.

*Carnival de Morte killer on the loose*

A gag rips through me, my feet already punching against the ground as I rush to the kitchen. Bending over the sink, dry heaves violently rack my spine as a cry breaks from my lips.

“Holy shit,” Hades clips. I can hear him tear off the couch, moments before his warm palm lands between my shoulder blades. “Vivianna,” he murmurs.

I shake my head, my eyes blurry as another dry heave tears through me.

I breathe heavily through my nose, stopping the gags as I glance up, staring once again at the screen.

The world knows.

Borris is alive.

Sloppily wiping at my nose, I glance up at Hades with fear in my eyes. “Borris is alive?” I whimper.

He sighs, shaking his head. “Not unless the dead found their way back to life. There isn’t any way Borris would be alive after what I did to him.”

My hand lifts, and I point at the screen. “But…” Another cry leaves me, my face crumpling in horror. “How?”

“Vivianna.” Alastor stands up from the ground, his face twisting in pain from laying on the floor. He cracks his neck as he walks up to me, a forlorn look on his face. “I can already see the panic rising. Take a deep breath.”

My brother knows me. He knows me well, but not as well as Hades. And from the look in Hades’s eyes, he already knows there isn’t a chance in me tamping down the panic attack on the cusp of breaking free.

It all comes back to me.

Every moment.

Jenna. Borris. The funhouse. The dirt lodged into my mouth.

The feeling of my thighs being pried apart.

I shiver, Hades’s hands suddenly feeling unwanted. I don’t want to be touched.

I shift out of his hold. His face twists in displeasure, but I can’t find it in me to comfort or reassure him. I’m falling.

I’m falling off the edge.

My breathing picks up, my chest constricting. It feels as if the walls are closing in, the air tightening, and it’s hard to breathe.

I cough, my fingers wrapping around my throat as the rest of the guys stand up. They all look hesitant, watching me as if I’m a wild animal about to attack.

“I can’t breathe,” I gasp, letting out another cough.

“She’s having a panic attack,” Alastor clips, rushing toward me.

My hands shoot out in front of me, my palms landing against his chest. “No!” I shout, leaping backward. “Stay away from me.”

“Viv,” Hades growls. He stays where he is, though I can see his hands clenching at his sides. He isn’t happy, and he doesn’t want to make things worse.

Though with Hades, sometimes he needs to crack through the worst to make it better.

I can see it in his eyes, the way they narrow as mine turn wide with fear. I shake my head, my trembling hands going in front of me.

“I can’t,” I choke. “Please, just let me… let me…” I gasp in a breath, terrified of the world.

All I can feel are his hands. His breath. The way he thrust inside of me.

I let out a wail, rushing around him and toward the back door. I don’t know what I need, but here is claustrophobic, and I need air.

Arms wrap around my waist, hauling me against a solid chest. I let out a scream, any hands feeling like his hands. It’s petrifying. Horrific.

“Please let me go,” I sob, thrashing my arms and legs. “I can’t breathe!” I sob.

“Mom!” Adrianna’s voice rings in the distance, and Hades snaps, opening the back door and stepping out into the cool morning as he mumbles, “Take care of her,” to whoever is behind him.

My feet brush the ground, but Hades doesn’t let me down as he moves around the side of the house. We are mostly hidden over here, the trees and fence leaving little visibility so no one can see us.

He spins me around, my spine hitting the side of the house. Hades keeps hold of my wrists, holding them in front of my waist. I attempt to pull them out of his hold, his skin searing against mine. A war in my brain fights between what was and what is. The past and present. Real and fiction.

It all just feels so clouded. So wrong. The trauma embedded into my bones never fades. It dilutes until the next moment it becomes crystal clear, as if the horror never left, and it’s just as painful as it was in the beginning. Sometimes worse.

“Almost five years, a new life, a new name, and a fucking douchebag boyfriend. All to heal your old wounds. But look at you, Vivianna. Look at you,” he snaps, and I flinch away from him.

His eyes cloud over, and he releases my wrists, pressing his hands against my chest, pinning me against the siding of the house. It digs into my shoulders, and I watch him with narrowed, hurt eyes.

I can barely breathe, barely see, but I do see Hades.

I always see Hades.

“You’re having panic attack.”

I nod, my limbs trembling as I draw in a shaky breath.

“I don’t want to be touched,” I whisper.

His eyes narrow. “His touch is not my touch.”

I lift my chin. “All touch is the same. It reminds me of *him*.”

His drags his hand up with a shake of his head, wrapping his fingers around my throat. “His touch is not my touch,” he repeats on a growl, fire in his eyes. “Borris was vile, with poisonous hands and tainted blood. That isn’t me, It’s not us. Feel me, Vivianna. *Me*.”

I draw in a shaky breath, my eyes squeezing shut as I attempt to decipher the difference between right and wrong.

It all feels wrong.

I shake my head, a sob ripping through my chest. “I can’t.”

“What do my hands feel like?”

I shiver. “I just need space. I need to be alone. It’s all too much,” I croak.

He growls, not giving me space, but stepping closer. “The only way to get past the trauma is to face the trauma. You want to run. Hide. It’s what you did for over two years. Did it help, butterfly? Are you in any better position than you were five years ago?”

I’m not. A new life was suppression. Borris has burrowed his way to the surface. And it’s painful.

“What do my hands feel like to you? Focus on me, butterfly. Open your eyes, and focus on me. Tell me what I feel like.” He emphasizes each word, and I try. I try so hard.

I can taste the dirt.

I can feel death seeping into my skin.

My knees give out, but Hades is quick to catch me, lifting me up into his arms. I don’t want to touch him, but my fight gives out, and I’m at the point where I just let him hold me, succumbing to the pain.

“It’s me, Vivianna. It’s just me,” he murmurs in my ear. I shudder against him, wanting his comfort and wanting to run from it at the same time.

“Tell me how I feel,” he rasps.

I draw in a breath, feeling his fingers as they graze my jaw.

*Cold and meaty.*

Warm and comforting.

*Dead.*

Electric.

It’s a ping-pong of emotions, but I take a deep breath, attempting to focus on the now.

“Electricity. Strength.” The words slip past my lips, and I can feel his fingers twitch against my jaw.

He hums, trailing his fingers up my cheekbone. He combs my messy strands of hair behind my ear, and I let out a small shiver.

“What else?”

“Powerful. Protective.”

He cups the base of my head, pulling me toward him until our foreheads are touching. He keeps me pinned against the wall, and I fight the urge to give in to the panic attack roaring in the background. It’s so strong, but Hades is stronger.

“Look at me, butterfly,” he orders softly.

My eyes flutter open, lashes wet with tears.

A crease between his eyebrows, so heavy I want to press my finger against it and rub it away. I don’t, only keeping my eyes pinned against his.

“I’m not Borris. No one in that house is Borris. He is dead, Vivianna. He’s so far removed from this earth, I don’t think his bones exist anymore. I made sure there wasn’t an inch of skin left on him. There wasn’t an ounce of blood left in his veins. He paid brutally for what he did to you, and not anything in the world is going to have him come back and hurt you again.”

My lower lip trembles, and my body slowly uncoils, loosening in his grip. “Someone is killing people,” I whisper.

He scowls, glancing briefly around the side of the house. “It’s not Borris.”

“Then who is it?” I wiggle my legs, and he slowly lets me down, though he keeps me close against him. It’s the smart thing to do, because I’m feeling flighty and unpredictable.

“I don’t know yet. But we’re going to figure it out.”

I blink, and blink again. “Who could it be?”

He shrugs. “I have… no idea.” He seems lost in his thoughts, and it’s only now do I realize how exhausted he looks. Tired eyes and slightly pale skin. It’s as if he’s been contemplating the same question through his mind. He doesn’t know how this is possible, just as I don’t, and I know it’s troubling him.

“Am I—are we in danger?”

His eyes cast down to mine. “You are never in danger. Not ever again.”

I think of Adrianna, and it makes my blood cool. My heart beats wildly in my chest, my panic attack slowed but boiling beneath the surface. “I will run if I am. I won’t let anything happen to Adrianna.”

His lips curl back as he snarls down at me. “Nothing is going to happen to Adrianna, or you for that matter. You’re safe, Vivianna. You’re safe *with me*.”

I want to believe it, but somehow, I don’t think I’ll ever be safe. Not completely.

“How will you figure it out?” I ask.

He slowly closes off, and I instantly grow irritated. I don’t like being kept in the dark, not when it has to do with this.

“I want to know everything. Don’t keep secrets from me, Hades.” My hands clench into fists, and I swallow over the lump in my throat, hating the way it grows with my fear, the never-ending panic.

“It’s not a fucking secret, Vivianna. It’s just not anything you need to even remotely worry about. Focus on Adrianna and let us deal with it.”

“But what about Princeton?”

I’m supposed to believe he’s going to take care of Princeton and deal with another killer? It makes me feel uneasy, and that’s putting it lightly.

His eyes narrow. “Yet another thing you don’t need to worry about.”

I slip out from where he pins me against the house, dragging in a deep breath. “Princeton isn’t something I’m willing to let you keep me in the dark about. I deserve to be there.”

His lip twitches. “No.”

My jaw tightens, my hands curling into fists at my sides. His eyes dart down briefly before looking up at me. “Knock it off.”

I shake my head. “Hades, if there’s anything I’ve learned over the last four years, it’s that I need to stand up for what’s right. For what I want. You might be able to control me, and fuck do I enjoy it sometimes. I can’t help but fall willing to your commands, but when it comes to Princeton, *I* am in control.”

“You aren’t,” he snaps.

I lift my chin, narrowing my eyes. “I am, and I’m going to be there when you meet him. And if I want, I’m going to be the one that ends him. It’s my choice, Hades. Don’t take that away from me.”

He takes a step toward me, and my back molds against the wall.

“Don’t,” I clip.

He lets out a low chuckle, stopping in his step. He shoves his hands into his pants pockets, watching me lazily. “You’re cute, butterfly.”

My anger skyrockets.

“What?” I snap.

His head slowly cocks to the side. “You, standing there all ferocious. Believing you truly have a say in the matter. Honestly thinking I’d allow you to get within a fucking mile of Princeton. It’d be easier for you if you wiped him from your mind completely, because you aren’t going to step foot in front of him ever again. Though, if you’re lucky, I’ll bring back my brass knuckles filled with blood, if you want the proof of his demise.”

We’re at a standstill. Both of us wanting to end the monster from afar. Neither of us knowing how to bow down in this standoff.

Him, wanting to control and protect.

Me, wanting revenge and power.

“I’m not having this debate with you,” I seethe, my panic drained from my body, and in its place is an intense anger. As is expected now when it comes to Princeton.

Spinning around, I walk past him and toward the door. Hades is quick to latch onto me, hauling me back against him.

“Don’t walk away from me, Vivianna,” he growls.

I look up at him, my eyes darting down briefly to the hold he has on my arm. I tear my arm free, glaring at him. “You don’t want me to know anything about Carnival de Morte. You won’t give me any information or let me go with you when you meet with Princeton. You’re keeping me in the dark, Hades. And as you are aware, I’ve been in the dark for a long time. I’m tired of being kept on the sidelines and not knowing what’s really going on. If you aren’t going to be transparent with me, then I’ll take care of everything myself.”

His eyes narrow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

My tongue rolls around inside my mouth. I don’t know what I’m going to do, exactly, but I know I need to do something. If Hades is going to keep me in the dark, I’m going to figure things out myself. With or without his help.

“I don’t know, but I’ll figure it out myself. Just like I always do.”

His eyes narrow. “Viv…”

I shake my head, taking a deep breath, my blood humming through my veins with an intensity that makes my fingers twitch. Without another look at Hades, I pull the door open, my eyes instantly flitting to Adrianna’s. She sits on Alastor’s lap, her hands in a bowl of Froot Loops as she smiles at me, her cheeks distorted from the abundance of loops lodged in her mouth.

I paste on a fake smile as I walk into the living room, my arms extending as I reach for my baby. She’s quick to forget about her cereal, Alastor’s hand snatching out as he catches the falling bowl. I pull her into my arms, my nose burrowing into her messy, sleep-tangled locks, loving the innocent smell that can only be described as love.

“Morning,” I mumble, amazed at how quickly fear, anger, and resentment can slip from my limbs with my daughter in my arms.

Her sticky fingers grip my neck, and the pain is welcome as I spin on my feet, heading back down the hallway. Hades opens the door, and I can feel his eyes on the side of my head. He wants to interject, insert himself in every inch of my life to protect me, but he doesn’t realize I spent the last five years surviving on my own.

I love Hades, but I’m not as weak as I once was, and he needs to realize this if we’re going to grow together.

I don’t pay him any mind as I make my way to our temporary bedroom. Shoving it open with my elbow, I slip between the crack and instantly close it, leaving no question that I’m not in the mood to be around anyone.

No one besides my daughter.

I unwrap her monkey legs and arms from around my body, settling her down on the bed. She instantly rolls onto her back, stretching out like a starfish.

I giggle down at her. “Are you being silly?”

She laughs, her cheeks pinkening.

And instantly, my broken wings are healed once again.

~

My fingers comb through slightly tangled strands of blonde hair as I scroll through my phone, pinging back and forth between recent news articles and the notes app on my phone.

There is so much information to find.

Carnival de Morte wasn’t small, and there were a lot of people working there. Many of them I’ve never spoken to—I didn’t even know their name.

So to dig all these people up, basically creating a list of anyone ever associated with the carnival, feels nearly impossible.

Yet, I’m still finding a way.

My notes page is scrollable with all that I’ve found, a great amount of it from my time spent at Carnival de Morte, combined with the news stations reporting way too much information to be safe. But I eat it up, writing down as many notes as I can, until my eyes burn from staring at my screen and a headache is beginning to form against my temples.

*Knock, knock.*

The door creaks open, Hades’s blank face slipping around the door.

“It’s been hours, butterfly.”

I shake my head, tapping my phone.

“No, it’s only been—” I swallow, glancing down at the time. It’s lunchtime. With a quick glance at Adrianna, I realize she fell asleep at some point, snuggled up with the large stuffed butterfly Hades got me from Carnival de Morte all those years ago.

My heart leaps.

I can hear Hades sigh from across the room as he steps inside. “What have you been doing in here?”

I swipe out of yet another news article, not ready to delve into the information I’ve found. He’s going to get angry, find a way to get rid of it because he doesn’t want me involved, and I’m going to be back at square one.

Dropping my phone face down on the bed, I watch as Hades’s eyes narrow, watching the phone before dragging his eyes up to me.

“Something tells me I’m not going to like whatever answer you give me.”

I give him a smile, trying to play it off. “I wasn’t doing anything. I needed to get away from your bossy ass for a second.”

His head tilts to the side. “Bossy?” The word comes out as if he is anything but, though I feel like bossy is ninety percent of his personality.

“Yeah, bossy,” I quip, sliding off the bed slowly as to not wake up Adrianna. Hades says nothing, and I turn around and glance at him, seeing him watching me heavily, his head lowered, narrowed eyes watching me through thick lashes.

The butterflies in my stomach lift their tired wings and flap against my rib cage. Heat floods through me, and a part of me hates how I react around him.

How he can so easily make me melt. Shatter to pieces at his feet, willing and wanting for any destruction he may bring.

As if he can hear my thoughts, he steps up to me, purposeful feet pounding against the carpet. Dressed in only a pair of low-slung basketball shorts, shirtless and tattooed, his hand wraps around the back of my neck, his fingers curling into the hair at the base of my skull. He gives a small tug, tilting my head back until he’s staring down at me, our faces only an inch apart.

“You know I’d kill every person in this world just to keep you safe,” he rasps, his head dropping as his lips brush against my jawline. His beard is growing, dark and thick as it scratches my sensitive skin.

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor. I don’t need you to be my shield in the world.”

He chuckles against my throat. “I’m not a fucking knight, Vivianna. I’m the devil, and I’ll burn down the world and every breathing soul in it just so you can live without bearing another scar.”

Scars, so many of them. Some even he has created.

He takes a deep breath, and I realize he didn’t come in here just to speak about his murderous ways. He has something on his mind.

I pull back, looking up at him, my brows pulled tightly together in concern. “I don’t even know if I want to know.”

I go to move out of his arms, but he grips me tightly around the nape of my neck, squeezing enough to maintain control. “There aren’t many things in this world that could take me out. I don’t fear death. Falling into the darkness is something I’ve always anticipated, eventually. But you’ve always brought me light, and even though I’m soaked in corruption, you make me want to be a better person. For you,” his eyes dart to Adrianna, “for Adrianna. And to save you, to keep both of you safe, there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do.”

My insides turn to glass, and I don’t dare move, afraid I’ll shatter. “What are you saying to me right now?”

He steps closer, hauling me against him, chest to chest, forehead to forehead. He makes a mess of my hair, his fingers burrowing through the blonde strands, as if he’s trying to mold our souls into one.

They already are.

“I’m trying to fucking say, that to protect you and Adrianna, there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do, even if it means risking myself. Even if it means dying and not being able to spend more time with you. There isn’t a damn thing I wouldn’t do for you, Viv. I just need you to know that. If something happens to me, the house will automatically get transferred into your name. It’s paid off. There isn’t a thing you’ll need. My bank is instructed to transfer all money to your name in the event something happens to me. You won’t ever need to work, not unless you want to. Adrianna will be taken care of for the rest of her life with that money. The boys and Alastor will always have your back.” His fingers twitch. “I just need you to know, if something happens, it’s because I fucking love you, but I’m going to make sure if something ever does, you’ll always be taken care of. By me.”

Tears flood down my cheeks, my body stone against his. “Why does it sound like you’re willingly going to die? So fucking easily, as if we mean nothing? Will you not even fight?”

My voice starts to rise, and I take a deep breath, glancing at Adrianna briefly, glad she’s still asleep, her face burrowed into the butterfly wings.

“I’ll always fight for you, Vivianna, which is why I need you to tell me you understand.”

I whip my head back and forth. “I don’t,” I whisper. “I don’t understand at all.”

“You do, and you will. I’m not weak.” He lets out a chuckle, his eyes darkening. “I am Hades Gray. Death doesn’t scare me, and it takes a lot to fucking kill me.” He steps back, finally releasing me, bringing a gust of crisp air between us. “After all, I watched you start a family with another man. If that didn’t kill me, I don’t think anything could.”

My face hardens. “Stop.” His words cut deeply, whether they intended to or not.

He shakes his head, anger creeping out between the shadows. He doesn’t like the prospect of losing me. Not again.

And it makes me realize I’m doing the right thing.

Digging, searching, uncovering everything there is to know about Carnival de Morte.

I’m not going to let Hades die. I refuse to let anything happen to him. He is mine. I am his. We’ve had our trials, our separation. Not again, not any longer.

Hades has saved me countless times.

Perhaps it’s time I find a way to save him.

# Chapter Six

## Hades

I

t is time.

In the house I bought but have yet to bring Vivianna to, I sit on the edge of our brand-new canopy bed, pulling a pair of black socks over my ankle strap, my medium-sized blade tucked tightly against the side of my ankle.

I drop my pants over the blade, standing up and adjusting the waist of my jeans. Grabbing my gun holster from the edge of the bed, I strap it around my belt loop, grabbing my pistol from the nightstand and double-checking to make sure it’s loaded. I shove it in, pulling my black hoodie over my waistband.

Heading into the walk-in closet—I left majority of it empty for Vivianna, leaving only a small side for myself—I grab one of my hats from the top rack, shoving it over my slicked-back hair.

I’ll be confronting Princeton in a couple hours. That is, if he decides to show up. I haven’t really thought of the idea of him not showing up.

When it comes to Vivianna, people become obsessive. It’s something about it her that is undeniable, something people cannot resist. She’s like a drug, and after you’ve had your first hit, there is no going back.

More addictive than the bullshit Alastor used to be on.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I dig my hand in, pulling it out and seeing Liam’s name on my screen. I swipe right, hitting the speaker button.

“Yeah,” I mumble, grabbing my keys and my second blade from on top of the bed before walking out of the master bedroom.

“I just got to town. Want us to pick you up?” I can hear Kennedy and Brennan arguing in the background. They must have just landed from the airport.

The boys grew up scattered around the United States. We all decided to land in Colorado, though the boys do take time to go visit their family. We made the plan to meet tonight and head out to the spot where we’re supposed to meet Princeton.

“No, I’m taking my bike. Has anyone spoken to Al?” I haven’t seen Vivianna since earlier today, and I made sure he kept her preoccupied and tried to keep her mind off the fact that today is the day.

Adrianna’s dad is going to die.

I gave Viv a kiss this morning and made sure to taint her insides and remind her who it is she belongs to. After enough orgasms to make her quivering and nearly faint, I slipped from the bed with the kiss and had to be alone.

I needed to get my mind right for tonight.

I fat joint, a glass of scotch, and a cold shower to shock my system. Now I’m ready, levelheaded, with a rage like no other roaring through my veins.

“I haven’t called him yet. We literally just hopped off the plane and got in the car. Kennedy wants to swing by his house to change his clothes, but otherwise we’re ready to go.”

I head down the stairs, the smell of fresh paint, new flooring, and unused furniture filling the air of the house.

I can’t wait until I bring Vivianna in here. I wanted to wait for Princeton to be out of the picture. So she can come in with relief and make this house our own.

So we can finally be a family.

“Go get what you need and meet me there. I’m going to call Al and see how Vivianna is doing.”

“But you don’t want to call Villain yourself,” Brennan laughs.

I shake my head. “Fuck off.” Hitting the disconnect button, I scroll through my contacts until I reach Alastor’s number.

Yeah, maybe I don’t want to call Vivianna right now, but it’s only because the moment I talk with her, the hours I’ve spent going into this calculated headspace, her voice is going to make all of it disappear.

Vivianna is good at screwing with my head, and I don’t need it tonight.

I’ll grow angry, walk up to Princeton, and slice his neck open without any words.

He deserves more than a fast death. I need to understand how he could do something so horrible to Vivianna.

She’s done nothing. She didn’t deserve it. Adrianna didn’t deserve it.

I dial Alastor’s number as I head out of the house, setting the security system I had installed yesterday—state of the art, by the way, so you’re literally never breaking into this house system—as Alastor picks up the phone.

“Yeah,” he grumbles. I can hear Adrianna and Viv giggling in the distance, the wind whipping through the speaker. I can imagine they are in the backyard running around, or Adrianna playing with the bubble machine she’s been obsessed with.

“Ready?” I ask, walking to the garage and sliding my leg over my bike. Slipping my shades on, I take a deep breath, more ready than I’ll ever be.

“I am, just waiting for the pizza to get delivered.”

I nod, knowing he can’t see me. “How is she doing?”

He chuckles. “Surprisingly… calm. It’s weird, actually. Very unlike Vivianna.”

My eyes narrow. “Suspiciously calm?”

“Nah. She’s happy. She’s spent her entire day laughing with Adrianna. I think she’s just come to terms with what’s going on. She’s accepting it, Hades. Don’t look too much into it.”

I shake my head, wanting to believe him, but Vivianna is more intelligent than he realizes. She also doesn’t back down just because someone asks her to.

“Make sure she isn’t up to anything. I’m heading over there now.”

He sighs, clearing his throat. “I’ll head out once the pizza gets here. See you soon.”

I disconnect the phone without another word, starting up my bike, and reverse out of the garage.

It’s time.

~

I pull up to the parking lot behind the Safeway, the gravel broken, trash littered around as it backs up to the thick forest. The lights are on up on the main street, but back here, the lights don’t even turn on anymore, and the only thing besides me in this parking lot is an old, rusted dumpster that’s been rummaged through about a million times.

It takes about ten minutes before Liam’s Range Rover rolls through the pothole-ridden parking lot, driving around the side of the dumpster and pulling up so the vehicle is mostly protected.

Liam, Brennan, and Kennedy slip out of the vehicle, all dressed in black with blank looks on their faces. I’m feeling the same, nearly numb.

“Where’s Alastor?” Kennedy asks, glancing around, just as a roar comes from behind us.

We turn around, seeing Alastor rolling down the uneven ground on his bike.

We’re all here. Except one.

“Hey,” Alastor says as he slips off his bike, adjusting his pistol behind his jeans.

“Where’s Vivianna?” I ask, expecting her to come running down the street at any moment.

Alastor sighs, shaking his head. “Watching *Moana* with Adri. They’re fine, Hades. Ask again and I’ll shoot you in the foot.”

Brennan laughs behind me.

“Where is the fucker?” Kennedy asks, pulling out a cigarette from his back pocket and sparking it up. The orange glow is bright in the darkness.

I pull out my phone, checking the time.

“We’re early.” By only about five minutes, but still. Princeton doesn’t seem like the type of guy who will show up early to a meeting like this. “I’m sure he’ll be late.”

“Do you have the fake Adri?” Alastor asks.

Liam nods, nodding to his Rover. “Yeah. In the car seat.”

I step up to the car, looking at the spare car seat with the blanket bunched around it. They made it look realistic, one of Adrianna’s blonde dolls sitting in the car seat, only a fraction of her hair showing beneath the heavy blanket. In the dark, it looks almost too good.

“How long are we supposed to wait until we decide he isn’t coming?” Kennedy asks, smoke streaming from his nose.

I stare off into the distance, a few cars passing by, but we’re on the dead end of town, in the middle of the back of an abandoned parking lot in the middle of the night. We’re invisible to everyone else.

“As long as it takes,” I clip.

And it does take a while. So long we all grow irritated, ready to go find him ourselves.

“All right, I’m out,” Alastor says, lifting his shoulders. “I’m not going to stand in the middle of a parking lot that smells like a combination of piss and pine and wait for some abusive douchebag to never show up. Sorry, I’d rather smoke a blunt and pass out.”

“Same, honestly.” Brennan scratches the back of his neck.

“Just wait.” I step around Alastor’s bike. A car slows down, rolling down the street at a speed that hasn’t been done by anyone all night. It’s too dark, too far away to see the license plate, but there’s something about the vehicle. “Hold on.”

The car drives down the street slowly, and I watch where it disappeared. A minute later, it appears again, slowly turning into the empty parking lot.

“He’s here,” I growl.

“Fucking hell, he actually decided to show up,” Alastor whispers beside me.

I shake my head as the dark sedan with tinted windows slowly rolls toward us. It slowly slides to a stop, the bumper about less than an inch away from Alastor’s bike.

“This motherfucker.” Alastor steps forward, and my hand snatches out, my fingers curling around his wrist.

“It’s intentional. Let him be a cock. He’ll get his.”

The car switches off, the low hum of the engine silencing in the suddenly thickened air. It takes a moment for the car door to open, a leather shoe and a pair of dress pants showing beneath the door when he steps out.

The dude is a fake. A fraud. I’ve watched this guy for years, and he doesn’t dress up. He pretends to, but he’s nothing but a loser.

He slinks himself out of the car, standing to his full height as he shuts the door. His eyes dart to each of us, passing over me a few times.

Three, four.

His eyes narrow. “I know you from somewhere.”

I cock my head to the side. “I highly doubt it.”

He steps closer to me, his finger pointed in my direction, and I’d love nothing more than to grab it and snap it off his hand. “No, my mind is solid. Photographic memory. I’ve seen you before.” His eyes are slits at this point, his body tensing to stone. “You were at the hospital when Adrianna was born. I saw you in the hospital parking ramp.”

I smile, evilly, manically. “Bingo.”

He steps up to me, and my body tenses, and the guys simultaneously take a step closer to him.

“What the fuck were you doing talking to Vale after she gave birth to *my daughter*?!” he roars in my face.

I lift my hand, pressing it against his chest. “Her name is Vivianna, and because *she. Is. Mine*.”

His chest puffs out, and he grabs onto my wrist. My lip curls, and I snarl at him. “Remove your filthy fingers from my wrist before I shove them down your throat.”

His fingers twitch, and slowly, he releases me, stepping back. “Tell me where my daughter is.”

I nod to the Rover behind me. “Sleeping. If you didn’t arrive so late, you may have had a chance to see her today.”

He moves to sidestep me, and I step in front of him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

He smiles at me, the same manic smile I just gave to him. He thinks he’s smart. Perhaps he thinks he’s a little intimidating. He’s none of those things.

He’s weak.

“I’m grabbing my daughter and leaving. And where is Vale—Vivianna? Why the fuck did she lie about her name? I’m taking that bitch with me, too.”

My fist flies out before the words register, my knuckles cracking against his cheekbone.

“Degrade her again. Go ahead, *Princeton*,” I growl.

His jaw works back and forth, his cheek instantly blooming a bright red as his palm rubs against the place my knuckles hit. “Where is Vale? We’re leaving.”

“Right here,” the voice comes from behind Princeton, and I think everyone cringes besides Princeton, who grows a disturbingly large smile.

“My little dahlia.” Princeton turns around with an ease and calmness he certainly should not have right now.

The moment his back is turned to me, my hand reaches out, grabbing the back of Princeton’s neck. I haul him back, yanking him behind me so roughly he falls on his ass.

“Don’t look at her,” I snap, my eyes sliding to Vivianna’s.

My fucking pain in the ass that I knew—*I knew*—wouldn’t listen to my demands to stay away.

“Viv, what the hell?” Alastor roars.

I ignore him, ignore the guys, and completely ignore Princeton who’s groaning on the ground as I step up to Vivianna. She doesn’t shrink away, doesn’t even slightly look ashamed for not listening to me.

Also dressed in all black, she stands there with her hair in a high ponytail, her arms slack at her sides, and a goddamn pistol gripped between her fingers.

I walk up to her, ready to snatch it from her fingers, but she raises the gun, pointing it at me.

My body freezes. My entire being… freezes.

I raise both hands, anger crashes across my face. “*What the fuck, Vivianna*?” I growl.

“I won’t kill you, Hades. But I will shoot you if you stand in the way of me. This is mine. For me. Don’t take that away from me.”

My eyes narrow. “You know what killing someone does to you. Do you really want to do it again?”

She lifts her chin. “Yes, I do.”

“It’s Adrianna’s father. It isn’t some slut who you want some vengeance on. Remember that.”

Her hand doesn’t falter, not in the slightest. Her knuckles whiten, though, and I’m not sure if she’s second-guessing or preparing to spill blood.

“I’m well aware of who I’m going up against. I’ve had a long time to think of this. A long, long time.” She takes a deep breath, her eyes darting around mine.

I hear shuffling, watching as Princeton shoves himself to a stand. The guys circle around him, keeping their distance, but close enough that under any wrong move, they can have him back on the ground.

“Vale, grab Adrianna and get in my car. We’re leaving.”

“Her name is Vivianna,” I growl through gritted teeth, not even turning my gaze to him. It remains on Vivianna, who flinches at the sound of his voice.

“Let me take care of this for you, butterfly. Go home, be with Adrianna.” My eyes narrow. “Where the fuck is she?”

She winces. “With a babysitter.”

My eyes flare, and Alastor cusses behind me. “I’ll go.” He walks past us, shaking his head as he glares at Viv. “Stupid fucking choices, sister. We don’t let strangers watch the kid.”

I try to control my breathing, though I want to explode at everything Vivianna is doing. Random strangers to watch the kid, grabbing a gun—from the looks of it, it’s one of Alastor’s she must have found—to coming out here, even after we told her not to.

It should surprise me, but really, it doesn’t.

Alastor gets on his bike, whipping out of the lot without another word.

“Get out of my way, Hades. Actually, all of you leave. This is between Princeton and I.” Vivianna waves the gun back and forth, and I can’t help the laugh that breaks from my chest.

“You’re crazy, Villain. Ain’t no way we’re leaving you here with this psychopath. Those bruises have barely faded on your neck,” Kennedy growls.

Vivianna’s eyes flash as she brings her free hand to her neck, brushing them against the faded brown-and-green markings.

“She deserved it. She pulled a knife on me,” Princeton quips.

My body twitches, so ready to tear his ass in two.

“What are you going to do, Vale? Shoot me? Where’s the love, baby?” He steps forward, and I step closer to Vivianna, narrowing my eyes at Princeton.

“Look.” The cockiness drops from his face, and he has the audacity to look slightly remorseful. I don’t believe it for a second. No one hurts Vivianna like that and isn’t a pure-blooded lunatic. “I’m sorry for everything. The cheating, the lying, I never meant to hurt you. If I could go back and take it all back, I would. I want to rewind time and go back to us in the house with Adrianna and be the happy family we once were.”

Vivianna’s face twists in pain, and I wonder for a second if she misses the fucker.

He digs into his pocket, and I reach behind me, grabbing my own gun.

But he doesn’t pull out a weapon.

He pulls out a motherfucking ring box.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Liam snaps.

My eyes widen in shock. I swing my gaze to Vivianna, and see her jaw slackened in disbelief.

Princeton gets down on his knee, forgetting about how his nice dress slacks are now soiled in the dirty, rotted pavement.

“We were once good, Vale. Once upon a time, we were a happy family, and I want to get back to that.” He pops open the top of the box, the slight creak of the springs filling the air. “Marry me, Vale. Marry me, come home to California, and let’s be a family again. You, me, and Adrianna. Be Mrs. Grant. Please? Marry me.” He lifts the box toward her, and every single one of us watch Vivianna without taking a breath.

We’re frozen in time, wondering how she’s going to react.

She stands there, still as stone, white as a sheet, staring at the glimmering ring with a look of incredulity.

Seconds tick onto minutes, and yet we all still stand there, waiting for her to make her own decision.

This is her decision to make.

And she needs to make the choice all on her own.

“Answer him, butterfly,” I murmur into the silence.

She jolts, as if broken from a trance. Looking up at me with glistening eyes, she takes a deep, shaky breath before she turns her gaze to Princeton.

“I loved you once, Princeton. Perhaps there is a part of me that will always love you. But I’ve been with you for years to not only experience happiness, but your cruelty, and how awful and degrading you can be. It would be a disservice to myself to put myself in a position where I’d be at your mercy again. Not only that, but I refuse to allow Adrianna to grow up in a home without love, respect, and filled with abuse. I would never put on a ring you presented to me, not in this lifetime, and not in the next. I watched my life flash before my eyes as you contemplated killing me, and I’ve never been so scared in my entire life.” She chokes up, her jaw clenching. “I wasn’t even that scared when I was raped by a monster in the woods.”

Princeton’s hand holding the ring box falters, lowering slightly to the ground.

“I’ll never marry you, Princeton. I may always love you, but I also hate you with such an intensity I want to watch you bleed out at my feet.”

The ring box falls to the ground, Princeton standing to his feet. The energy and air change, crackling with tension. We’re all on high alert, and I watch as Vivianna raises her gun.

“The only thing I want tonight is to walk away from your bleeding, dead body on the ground,” she whispers.

Princeton’s head tilts to the side, and I realize this is the psychopath Vivianna alluded to. The man with the mask, precise in every move he makes. He looks calm on the exterior, but I can see the roaring fire internally, as I contain that same heat in my blood.

The difference is, he can’t control it.

I can.

“I had a feeling you wouldn’t be so easily willing to come back to me, though I will be honest, I did not expect you would be so strong in wanting to see me dead. Here’s the thing, though, *Vivianna*…” The way he says her name has me curling my lip back. “If I’m going to die tonight, *so are you.*”

The ring box is kicked aside as Princeton rushes forward, faster than Vivianna can react. He rams into her, both of them falling to the ground.

“You’re mine. Forever.” His hands go around her neck, and I watch them instantly whiten as he tightens his fingers around her throat.

The four of us react quickly, darting forward. Ready to tear him in two.

*Bang. Bang.*

Princeton’s body jolts on top of Vivianna, the force of the gunshot having him fall to the side and roll onto his back. His dress shirt starts blooming with red. One growing circle in the stomach, one in the chest.

Vivianna looks up at the night sky, filled with stars, tears flooding down her temples as her fingers twitch around the handle of the gun. Her legs spread, arms at her sides, she looks in shock as she stares into the darkness. Her neck is filled with scratches and red marks that will inevitably turn into bruises.

“Fucking… bitch,” Princeton coughs, rolling onto his side. Blood spurts from his mouth as he lets out a groan. “Funny thing is…” He gasps, wheezing as he struggles to catch his breath. “I alerted the authorities about this little meeting.” Each word comes out as a struggle, taking too long to form. “Gunshots will surely bring them here any minute.” He gasps in a breath, and I can hear the crackling, his lungs filling with blood. “Have fun in prison, Vale.”

I blink at Princeton for a moment before I step forward, cocking my gun back and pointing it at his skull.

“Quit breathing.”

*Bang.*

One quick shot behind the eyes, and his head lolls to the side as blood begins pooling behind his head.

“Police are coming?” Vivianna cries, scrambling to her feet, barely coherent. Her eyes are faded, so far gone from reality at this moment.

“Get out of here. We’ll take care of this,” I bark at her. “However you came here, just go home.”

Sirens sound in the distance, and the guys let out a string of curses behind me.

“I’m not letting you go to prison for me! This was my problem, not yours! You should have just let me handle this on my own!”

I step up to her, my body crackling with rage. “Go home. I’ll deal with you later.”

She whips her head back and forth. “No. I’m not letting you guys take the fall.”

I grab her bicep, hauling her to the side. Wanting to shove her all the way back to Alastor’s. Where she’s safe.

“Go!” I roar at her.

She whips her hand free, turning around and staring up at me.

“Sorry, I can’t do that. Wipe my fingerprints and put his on it,” she states, and I’m instantly confused.

“What?” I bark.

She turns the gun around, the nose at the top of her stomach.

“No!” I shout at the top of my lungs.

The guys dart forward, but it’s too late.

*Bang.*

The gun falls from her hand, just as she falls to the side, her body tumbling to the ground.

“Vivianna!” I shout, dropping to my knees.

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck.” Kennedy rushes up behind me, followed by Liam and Brennan.

“What the fuck do we do?” Brennan barks.

“Wipe… my prints. Give him the gun,” Vivianna gasps, her entire face twisting in pain. She presses her hands against her stomach, and they’re instantly painted in red.

I bat her hand away, watching her abdomen fill with blood.

My insides curl in agony as I watch the love of my life bleed out in front of me. The amount of times I’ve seen Vivianna toe the edges of death are enough for me to slip into insanity.

“No. Absolutely fucking not,” I growl, my hand pressing into her stomach. Warm crimson coats my palms as I press my hand into her. She lets out a groan, and I grit my teeth as the lights of the police light up the parking lot.

“Fuck,” Kennedy grabs the gun from the ground, wiping it clean with his shirt as he rushes over to Princeton. He grabs his hand, pressing his prints all over the gun.

“I think we’re fucked,” Brennan chokes.

I whip my head back and forth, not paying attention to them. I stare down at Vivianna, who looks up at me in fear.

“Am I going to die? I feel like I’m really going to die this time,” she whimpers, her words slurring slightly. She looks sickly pale, her body starting to shake.

She’s going into shock.

“You aren’t going to die, butterfly. I won’t let you. I promise you that,” I growl down at her.

She gasps in a breath, pain and fear evident in her eyes. “I don’t think I’m going to make it. Will you…” She lets out a sob, which turns into a pained cough. Blood coats her lower lip, and I swallow down a roar. “Will you please take care of Adrianna for me?”

My free hand goes to her forehead, and I keep her eyes trained on me. “You aren’t dying. You. Are. Not. Dying. Do you hear me? I love you. I love you so fucking much. There is no way tonight is our last night. We have a family to make. I need you to show you our new house. We have so many memories ahead of us, butterfly. Tonight is not the end. I refuse. So, stay with me, okay? Stay with me.”

She nods, a small cry bursting from her lips.

“Over here!” Liam screams, waving his hands above his head. “We need an ambulance.”

Two police cars with their overly obnoxious sirens blare through the night as they pull up on each side of Princeton’s car. Officers burst from their vehicles; weapons drawn.

“Everyone, get on the ground!”

The three guys drop to their stomachs, their arms going above their heads.

They point their gun toward me. “Step away from the woman, get on your stomach!”

“I’m not taking my hand off her. She’s bleeding, and we need an ambulance!” I bark at them.

They drop their eyes to her stomach. One of them pulls his radio from his shoulder, speaking into it and requesting an immediate ambulance.

“Get on your stomach, sir,” he says as he puts his radio back into his holster.

“I’m not letting go of her. You’re going to have to pull me off her if you expect me to remove my hand.”

“Hades,” Vivianna coughs. “I can’t feel my body,” she cries.

My eyes widen, and I look up at the officer. “I’m taking her to the hospital myself. I’ll fucking get there faster.” Glancing down at Vivianna, I want to give her every inch of blood running through my veins. “Remember to stay with me, okay? I’m going to get you some help.”

She nods, fear so fucking evident in her eyes it almost makes me crack.

I take a deep breath, lifting my bloodred hand away from her stomach. A quick glance behind me shows Princeton lying dead on the ground, a pool of blood around him. I shove to my feet, walking toward him.

“Sir, get on the ground!” one of the officers shouts at me.

“I’m getting my girl to the hospital. I’ll be faster than an ambulance,” I snap.

“An ambulance is en route. Get on the ground! I’m not going to ask you again!”

“You’re going to have to fucking kill me,” I growl, bending over to reach into Princeton’s pockets.

“Sir!” the other one shouts. “Stay away from the body!”

“Fuck off!”

*Bang.*

Pain.

And everything goes dark.

# Chapter Seven

## Vivianna

P

ain.

There is so much pain, I don’t want to open my eyes.

What’s worse is the scent of disinfectant.

The sound of the constant beep.

I’m transported back in time, to waking up after the house fire that killed my mom. I feel as if the pain has just happened, the phantom feeling of new skin against my limbs.

My mouth opens before my eyes, a whimper escaping my lips.

“Vivianna.” Alastor’s worried voice reaches my ears, and my eyes crack open, fear that perhaps I have gone back in time rushing me.

And I’ll have to watch my mom die all over again.

Though it isn’t the Alastor from years ago standing in front of me. It’s the now, healthy, adult Alastor, who looks both worried and angry, staring down at me.

I pull my hands, hearing a clank.

He winces, his eyes darting to the door. I follow his gaze, seeing a police officer standing there, watching the both of us with suspicious eyes. I glance up, seeing my hands cuffed to each side of the bed.

“What’s going on?” I croak.

Alastor steps up to me, a heavy line forming between his eyes. “You’re under arrest. They think you killed Princeton.”

I open my mouth, and he’s quick to step up to me, his eyes narrowed. “Though we’re all getting it cleared up what really happened. We’re just glad you’re alive after Princeton shot you. It’s a good thing Hades was there to defend you when it happened.”

He’s telling me the story, so our timelines are the same.

I stare at him a second, swallowing over my parched throat as I let out a slow nod.

“Where is everyone?” I whisper.

He cocks his head to the side. “Liam and Brennan are at the house with Adrianna. Kennedy is with Hades.”

*Adrianna.* “How long have I been in here for?”

“Two days.”

My heart clenches. She’s probably so worried, so confused.

“What about Hades?” I blink away the tears with my question, wondering why he isn’t in here with me. Knowing Hades, he wouldn’t leave my sight if it were possible.

Thoughts of his face as he tried to keep me alive. He was gutted. Traumatized.

Something must be wrong.

Alastor’s eyes shutter. “They’re trying to get him out of custody, too. He’s in a room at the other end of the hall.”

I blink. “Why is he in the hospital?”

His finger taps against his jeans. “Don’t freak out.”

I let out a laugh, though it comes out as a weird croak-squeak. “Too late for that. Fucking tell me, Al.”

His eyes dart to the officer, who’s doing a very good job at remaining completely emotionless to the conversation me and my brother are having.

“The police shot him when he was trying to save you.”

I attempt to shoot up in bed, the cuffs restraining me, clanking loudly against the bed.

The officer straightens, his hands going to his belt. “Hey, relax.”

My lips curl back as I snarl at him. “Bring me to Hades.”

His face remains still. “Lay back down or else your visitor will have to leave. You’re lucky he’s able to be in here anyway. It’s against policy.”

“Fuck the police,” I growl, feeling animalistic.

*They shot Hades?!*

“Is he okay?” I cry, turning my watery eyes toward my brother. “Where did he get shot?”

He looks calm, which should be calming to me, but all it does it make me more nervous.

“He’s fine, Viv. You do need to relax. They shot him in the back. It punctured his lung. It collapsed. They had some difficulty fixing it, but he’s going to be fine. He’s back to normal.” His face twists. “Being just as ornery as seeing you. But you’re both in cuffs, and…” He shrugs. “These police officers are douchebags, I guess.”

The police officer steps back up to the door, resuming his pose of absolutely uselessness.

I grind my teeth together as I stare at my brother. “I want to see Hades.”

Sadness touches his eyes. “I’m sorry, Viv. You can’t. We’re working as hard as we can to get you both cleared. We called in an attorney Kennedy’s dad knows, and they think you both will be cleared and released tomorrow, if all goes well and you’re both feeling good enough.”

I glance down at my stomach. “Am I okay?”

Pain is evident with each breath I take, but I’m breathing, so I guess that has to mean something.

He nods. “Surgery to remove the bullet lodged into your stomach, but you’ve been steady and stable since yesterday.”

I take a deep breath, wincing through the pain. “I hate hospitals.”

Alastor’s face closes up a bit. “Me too.”

I lay back down on the bed, tears flooding my eyes. “I miss Mom,” I croak, my cheeks instantly becoming soaked with emotion.

Alastor steps up to the bed but holds himself back. I don’t know if he’s not allowed to touch me, or if he refuses to give in to the grief that will never go away. “She’s still here with you, Viv.”

*Is she?*

Would she be proud of me? Of the person I’ve become?

What would she think of me murdering people in the time since she’s passed?

Would she love Adrianna as much as I do?

Grief tumbles through me knowing Adrianna will never be able to know her grandma, the woman who gave me so much love.

I try to roll onto my side, giving in to my sadness, but the cuffs once against clank against the bed, and I’m stuck on my back.

I tug on them roughly. “I fucking hate this shit. Let me go,” I sob.

“Calm down,” Alastor growls.

“I just… too much has happened.”

With my grief, there is a relief.

Princeton is gone. The monster is finally… gone.

A sob breaks from my chest, and I can’t help but reach for my ugly printed gown attached to my body, but the cuffs restrict me from moving them more than a few inches.

I growl so ferociously spittle flies from my lips.

The officer at the door clutches his belt, his eyes narrowing as he anticipates me losing my shit. “Ma’am, I’m going to need you to calm down.”

“I need you to let me the hell out of here!” Claustrophobia clutches me, memories of my mom, phantom pains of the burns and skin that isn’t my own attached to me.

I want out of here. Out of this body. Out of this hospital. Out of this *pain.*

There’s a knock on the door, and all of us go silent as we turn around and see three men in suits with badges attached to their chests.

Detectives.

I shrink into the mattress with narrowed eyes, my lips pressing together in displeasure.

“We’re here to interview Miss Finch,” the one in front states, looking at me like he’s about to put me behind bars forever.

I pull silently on the cuffs, wishing for a moment I could break the bones in my wrist and break free from this confinement.

The officer guarding the door steps slightly to the side. “She is a little aggravated at the moment. I’m not quite sure how much you’ll be able to get out of her.”

The detective’s lip pulls up in a slight snarl. “I’m sure I’ve dealt with worse.”

The officer shrugs, stepping out of the room and allowing the three detectives to make their entrance. They step inside, not saying a word as they circle the end of the bed. The one in the center, who I’d assume is the main detective on the case, turns toward Alastor.

“Miss Finch isn’t allowed visitors, so I’m not quite sure how you’re allowed in here. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Alastor chuckles. “This is my sister. I’m not leaving her in here alone.”

The detective closest to him steps forward. “You’re going to have to leave the room, sir.”

Alastor steps forward too, not at all concerned about being surrounded by three armed detectives. “You're going to have to pull me out in cuffs then.”

I lean forward as much as possible, the cuffs clinking against the ends of the bed. “My brother is going to stay in here, otherwise I’m not going to be saying a damn word.”

The three detectives look at each other, unsure of how to proceed.

“Let him stay,” I growl, “he's not going to do anything.”

“Miss Finch, I don’t think you understand the seriousness of this situation. You’re under investigation for murder. We don’t typically give you excessive rights just because you ask.”

I shrug. “Well then, it looks like I’m not giving you a fucking word.”

Alastor chuckles silently, but I can feel the humor in the shift of his body.

The detective in the center sighs, turning around and grabbing the circular doctor stool in the corner of the room. He sits down on it, moving the squeaky wheels across the room until he’s directly at the bottom of the bed. His eyes turn toward Alastor, his face blank. “You say a word or create any issues, you’ll be leaving this room in cuffs.”

Alastor doesn’t say a word, remaining motionless.

The detective reaches into his pocket, pulling out a small lined notepad with a black pen. The two detectives remain on either side of him, their hands on their belts as their eyes pierce mine.

“Miss Finch… or do you go by *Miss Finley*?” His head tilts to the side in an arrogant manner, and I’m momentarily glad I have cuffs attached to my wrists, or I may have attempted to redden his cocky face with my palm.

I grind my teeth together, unsure how much I should delve into my life. “People do that, you know. Change their name and start over.”

He nods, knowing it’s the truth. “But typically when someone disappears and reappears as a different person, there’s usually a reason they do so.” He leans forward slightly, as if he’s about to taste the truth. “The thing is, Vivianna, a few years back you were involved in a fire that led to the death of your mother. Shortly after that, you disappeared, and you didn’t resurface until now, after another fire. New person, new name, same crime.”

Alastor growls, stepping forward while tears spring to my eyes. “You can’t really be accusing my fucking sister of starting the fire that killed our mom?” he roars so loudly the bed vibrates beneath me. “You’re out of your fucking mind. You do realize my sister almost died, right? You do realize she was in surgery, had to deal with extensive trauma because of the trauma you think she caused?” He scoffs, shaking his head, his fisted hands at his sides shaking with barely-there restraint.

The two standing detectives move toward Alastor. “We’re going to have to ask you to leave.”

“He’s not leaving!” I scream, tears flooding down my face. “You don’t understand. You weren’t there. My brother was the only one who was there for me. He had to watch his only family nearly die in front of him. It’s offensive you think I’d kill my own mom!” I can’t help the sob that breaks free. I can’t stop it.

“Oh, we know all about Alastor Finch after the fire. He’s on our list of possible murder suspects for another murder that happened a few years ago,” the detective sighs, jotting something down on his pad, lifting an eyebrow without glancing at me.

“I never killed JC!” he roars.

The detectives grab onto Alastor, and I clank the cuffs against the bed until the detectives stop. “He’s not leaving. My brother is not leaving me,” I pant, trapped here and in a whirl of an anxiety attack. The room closes in on me, the air turning heavy as I gasp in a painful breath. “Don’t take my brother away from me.”

Alastor whips away from the guards, storming up to the edge of the bed and grabbing onto my shoulders. “I’m not leaving you, Vivianna. I won’t.” He whips his head back and forth with a vigor and I realize that unless he dies, he will never leave me again.

Silent tears track down my cheeks, and I never realized how much I needed my brother until right this moment.

I nod my head, my chin quivering uncontrollably.

“The fire was marked as an accident, but digging into it, we couldn’t find out a solid cause for the fire,” the detective continues.

Alastor whips his gaze toward the detective. “Drop it. The fire is done. My mom is dead. My sister is permanently fucked from it. She had nothing to do with it, and you’re wasting your breath trying to figure out otherwise.”

The detective tilts his head to the side before turning his gaze to me. “What is the reason for the name change?”

My eyes narrow. “It’s none of your business.”

He writes something down. “Why California?”

I shrug. “The ocean?” I clip sarcastically.

“There was a period of nine months where you disappeared from Colorado before you appeared in California. Where were you during that period?”

*Carnival de Morte.*

“Nowhere. Everywhere. Why does it matter? What does this have to do with me being here, cuffed to a bed?”

He sighs, writing something else down. “Who is Princeton Grant to you?”

My lips flatted, along with my eyes. “He’s dead.”

His eyebrows lift slightly. “He is. And you killed him?”

I lift my chin. “I did.”

“It was self-defense,” Alastor growls.

The detective presses his lips into a thin line. Leaning back in his chair, he crosses his leg over the other, getting comfortable in his chair. He’s an attractive man, dark hair combed meticulously to the side. He’s somewhere in his mid to late forties, with a dark shadow along his sharp jaw and piercing dark eyes. I’d maybe melt a little bit at his features if he didn’t look at me like I’m a monster and manipulator.

If my heart wasn’t captured and locked away by another.

“Here’s the conflicting information, Miss Finch. Hades Gray in the next room stated you didn’t kill him at all. Your brother next to you says you killed him in self-defense. You, yourself, seem proud of the fact you potentially killed him. Which story is the correct one?”

“Mine,” I grit through my teeth.

He bobs his head from side to side. “Perhaps, though there is scientific evidence that makes me question your answer.”

I blink at him. “What?”

“Princeton Grant had a bullet wound here,” he points to his own torso, just about the center. “The direction of the bullet entering him would confirm that someone about your height shot him in the chest.” His head tilts to the side, and I intensely hate the smirk which lifts his lips. “Though, he also had a bullet wound here.” He points to the spot directly between his eyebrows. “It wasn’t tilted up as if it was shot from someone of your height. It was shot straight through, straight on. Only someone around six feet would be able to shoot a bullet with that trajectory. So, I ask you, Miss Finch. Did you also happen to shoot Mr. Grant in the head?”

I swallow over the lump in my throat, my fingernails pressing into my palms in anger. The bite of pain in my hands not nearly enough to take away the fear rolling through my veins.

I will not allow them to take Hades down.

They’ll have to kill me if they want to put him behind bars.

“What are you trying to say?” I grit between my teeth.

He leans forward, his shoes squeaking slightly on the floor as he moves as close to the bed as possible. “Did Hades Gray shoot Mr. Grant in the head?”

*Clank.*

I pull on the cuffs. “No,” I growl. “Maybe he was on his fucking knees.”

He sighs, leaning back, writing something on his pad of paper. He glances up at me. “Did you start the fire in California?”

I grind my teeth together, wondering how many fires I can start before the burn is permanently etched against my skin.

I don’t say a word.

“Hmm,” he mumbles, writing something down on his pad of paper. “You do realize, if you don’t cooperate, you’ll most likely be charged with first-degree murder?”

I can feel the rage ripple through Alastor beside me. I do nothing besides sit where I am, pulling my wrists against the cuffs. The metal digs into the skin on my wrists, and I grit my teeth through the pain.

I need to get out of here.

“I’m not going to prison. You don’t know the type of man Princeton was.” Tears spring to my eyes when I remember all the things Princeton has done, the pain I endured with him.

“Are you telling me you killed Princeton for retribution?” the detective asks, narrowing his eyes.

I whip my head back and forth, rocking against the bed in an attempt to get free. “Princeton was a vile human who didn’t deserve to breathe another second on this earth.” I tilt my chin toward the ceiling, showing off the barely-there bruises, though if one looks close enough, they should be able to see them. “He choked me out until I was seconds from death. He verbally abused me, mentally manipulated me, and degraded me at every turn. That man was a stain on society, and if he’s not alive anymore, I don’t think the world is going to suffer any.”

“But you killed him. You do realize we aren’t grim reapers? We don’t have a say in who lives and dies. There are laws to protect us from that fact. You broke the law, Miss Finch, and as we sit here now, you seem to be admitting to that fact.”

“I—”

*Knock, knock, knock.*

The door opens, the guard who was blocking it looking positively irritated with Hades, Kennedy, and Brennan standing around him, all of them looking at the guard as if they want to tear his head from his shoulders.

“Charges are dropped,” Brennan says from the left.

Hades doesn’t wait a second, shouldering past the guard. The guard instantly attempts to grab at Hades. Hades turns to stone, his head turning slightly to snarl at the guard. “I suggest you don’t fucking touch me.”

“This room is off-limits to visitors. There is currently an interview going on. You all need to leave.”

Hades growls before turning around, his eyes instantly landing on mine. I gasp, the intensity in his stare locking me to the bed. A wave of relief and love roars through his gaze, his eyes rolling over every inch of my body. They land on my wrists cuffed to the bed, anger darkening his gaze. He storms across the room, stopping once he’s beside the bed. I inhale deeply, able to smell the light, intoxicating scent of Hades swirling around me.

His fingers drop to my chin, pulling my head from side to side before they trail down my arms, landing on my wrists, the metal tight around the skin. My eyes drop to my hand, taking in my reddened skin.

I can feel the growl roll through Hades before it fills the room. His fingers drop from my wrists as he bends down, his lips pressing against mine briefly before he stands up straight, turning toward the detectives.

“Remove her cuffs. Now.”

The detective sitting on the stool chuckles, once again crossing his leg over the other. “Hades Gray. How did you get out of your own restraints?”

Hades tilts his head to the side. “The same way you’re about to unlock Vivianna’s wrists. With a fucking key.”

“She’s being held for murder, Mr. Gray. We will not be releasing her,” the detective admonishes.

“Actually.” Brennan steps forward, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a piece of folded-up paper. It looks crisp, freshly printed as he unfolds it. He hands it to the detective, who looks at it with a blank face before slowly reaching forward, peeling the paper out of his hands.

The other two step forward, reading it over the detective’s shoulder. Their eyes rove from left to right, left to right. I swear they read the piece of paper ten times before the detective in the middle crumples it up, glaring up at Hades.

“I’m not releasing her until I speak with the judge.”

Hades steps forward, looming over the detective. “You aren’t stepping out of this fucking room without uncuffing her,” Hades growls, rage vibrating through his body.

Brennan steps forward. “That piece of paper is legit. I’m sure you know who my father is. Quite the high-profile judge out in New York. He has many ties. Once I spoke to him about the situation, all it took was a quick call to the FBI and he was able to clear both Hades’s and Vivianna’s names.”

The detective stands up, ending up only inches away from Hades’s face.

“I’m going to make a call.” The detective goes to step away, but Hades intercepts him, blocking his exit.

“Remove. Her. Cuffs.”

A chill runs through me at the dangerous edge to Hades’s tone. I attempt to sit up slightly, the cuffs rattling on the bed.

Hades whips his gaze to mine, dropping his eyes to my wrists. With quick feet, he crosses the room, staring down at me. The shadows cross his face, dark facial hair against dark eyes. So much darkness, yet when he looks at me, all I feel is the heat and strength of his love. The intensity in our eye contact captures me completely, my breath whooshing from my lungs.

*I love you*, I mouth to him.

His eyes soften before they harden into two dark pools, and I can’t help but fall into the abyss before he turns his gaze up to the detective. “I’m giving you five minutes to remove her cuffs.”

The other three guys stand up beside Hades, the four of them creating a line against the three detectives.

Four dangerous men going up against three armed detectives. I should be shocked, but I’m not.

If it came down to it, I’m almost certain my four guys would win. Every single time.

“Remove her cuffs,” Alastor growls.

“A quick call to my father, and I don’t think he’d be happy to hear about the three of you being so uncooperative.” Brennan shrugs his shoulders.

The detective in the center stiffens.

I watch as his jaw works back and forth before he opens his fingers, the piece of paper falling from his grip, silently to the ground. He reaches into his pocket, pulling out the small handcuff keys. He extends them to Hades.

“You know, I’ve never worked a case where not only one, but two murderers have gotten off without even a slap on the wrist.”

Hades smiles, and a chill runs through my spine. “Well, perhaps you don’t know enough good murderers.”

The detective’s face turns dark red in anger. His fingers go to his suit, and he straightens it, standing to his full height. He still doesn’t crest over Hades.

“It wouldn’t take much to lock you up, Hades Gray. Your record is surprisingly squeaky clean, but whenever a man like you has no trace, there’s usually a lot to uncover.”

Hades stiffens, extending the keys to Alastor. Alastor grabs them quickly, rushing over to me and unlocking my cuffs. My hands thump as blood rushes through them. I rub at my wrists, wincing as I stare down at the red rings around them.

A soft whimper escapes as I push off the bed, walking with the disgustingly feeling of hospital socks on my feet to Hades. He reaches out without even glancing at me, pulling me in front of him. I become locked against his front, my heart instantly settling at the feel of him against me.

“You can threaten me all you want, but usually when that happens, people end up with a bullet in their skulls.” I can feel the smile behind me as I stare up at the detective, wide-eyed.

Did Hades just threaten to kill him?

I don’t think there’s much Hades wouldn’t do at this point.

“Good day, detectives. Probably in your best interest if we don’t cross paths again.” Hades nods toward the door, a sure indication that the detectives are to get the hell out of the hospital room.

The detectives nod, not one of them looking pleased as they straighten themselves, and one by one, walk out of the hospital room.

The guard stands by the door, a look of displeasure on his face.

“Leave,” Hades snaps at him.

The guard’s nostrils flare, and I can see the words rolling through his mouth.

“Don’t say a word, dude. Just get the fuck out of here,” Kennedy waves him off with an almost bored tone.

Once it’s just the five of us, Hades spins me around, our eyes locking.

“How did you guys make this happen?” I whisper.

He steps toward me, his thumb reaching out and brushing across my lower lip. The world fades away and as usual, it’s just the two of us locked in our own electrified universe.

“Because taking the world out is easy when it comes to saving you. I’ll do anything to keep you safe, butterfly. Even if it means destroying the world and every person in it.”

I lick my lips, parched from the intensity of his words.

“You aren’t invincible.” And he isn’t. Saying something, doing something to the wrong person could be a mistake, and I don’t want to live a life without him. He should be smarter, mostly when it comes to threatening death to armed law enforcement officials.

He chuckles, his fingers curling around the back of my neck. He gives it a light squeeze, pulling me toward him.

The guys laugh beside me, and I wonder if they’re all just a little crazy.

“We’re all invincible, butterfly. Haven’t you realized that yet?” He smirks at me, so devilishly a chill runs over me.

He gives my neck a squeeze, leaning down until his lips brush my ear. “We don’t bow down for anyone, darling. The world gets on their knees for us. And when someone fucks with you, butterfly, they better realize they’re at risk for many, many hours of torture.”

I swallow over my dried throat, looking up at him with rounded eyes.

And all I can see is pure, honest darkness in his dark orbs.

“You’re mine, Vivianna, and nothing in the world is going to take you away from me.”

# Chapter Eight

## Hades

W

alking through the empty halls, I’m surprised at the hint of nervousness running through me.

I hope she likes our new home.

No, I know she’s going to like it. She’s going to love it.

It’s Vivianna. My darling. My butterfly. Our tastes are so similar, I am positive she’s going to fall in love with this home just as much as I have. We’re cut from the same cloth, made to experience this world and its journeys together.

I run my fingers through my damp hair, just having hopped out of the shower with a text from Vivianna saying she’s almost here.

It’s been a few days since she was released from the hospital. Although the cuffs were removed within an hour of the charges being dropped, her gunshot wound was enough that she needed to be under observation to make sure there weren’t any complications or bleeding the doctors weren’t aware of.

She’s out now, we all are. Vivianna is almost as good as new, though with strict orders from the doctors to not lift anything too heavy. It’s aggravated Adrianna, being a mommy’s girl who loves being held constantly. I’m picking up the slack, and I choke on fucking air every time that kid presses her sticky fingers against my neck or face with love in her eyes.

There’s something about her.

It’s everything.

That girl is mine, even if her blood doesn’t have my DNA. She *is* mine.

Adrianna is my daughter.

Headlights pull up outside the house, and I take a deep breath as I walk to the front door, turning off the security system I had installed just for the girls, and unlock the double door, pulling it open just as Viv and Adrianna hop out of the car.

Adrianna is oblivious to the monstrous black house that backs up to the mountains. She just sees me, a bright smile breaking across her face as she disconnects her hand from her mother’s and races up to me.

I bend down, my own wound healing, slower than Vivianna’s since I’m picking up Adrianna about fifty times a day. I lift her into my arms, letting out a grunt as I adjust her a bit. My eyes land on Vivianna, who’s still standing on the dark stone pathway, her eyes wide as she tilts her head back and glances up at our two-story home.

“This is… yours?” she whispers.

I smile at her, sharp teeth showing. “Ours, butterfly. This home is *ours*.”

She swallows, and I watch it work its way down her throat as her eyes dart around every section of the house. The black two-story house is built tall with wide, dark gray shutters surrounding it. A large stone pathway curves from the wide driveway, wrapping around the side of the house and up to the front stone porch, white columns pillared directly in front of the doorway.

This home wasn’t a custom build, but it may as well have been, because it’s absolutely perfect.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she croaks. “It needs some plants.”

I bark out a laugh, glancing down at the stones bordering around the edges of the house. “We’ll work on that. Come take a look at the inside.” I nod my head through the doors, and Vivianna nods, making her way down the rest of the sidewalk and in through the wide doorway.

She stops the moment she steps inside, tilting her head back again to glance up at the vaulted ceilings in the foyer. A wide staircase leads up to the second level, a balcony extending from one end of the second story to the next. The railing is stained black, the walls a stark white.

It isn’t decorated yet. That’s something I wanted to have Vivianna do with me. Plus, I imagine she’s a bit of a better decorator than I am.

Though I did place a few items in the home, a high-top, stained dark table with a bench and chairs surrounding it. I also bought us a leather sectional couch, state of the art with reclining, heated seats.

With my free hand, I wrap my arm around Vivianna’s waist and push us down the hallway. I watch her closely as she takes in everything, her eyes drinking in every detail.

We step into the kitchen, a white marble countertop with black matted cabinetry. Vivianna brings her small fingers up, grazing them across the pristine island. Her eyes rove across the space, ending in the living room. A stone fireplace sits against the far end of the wall, the couch and a few chairs curving around it. An oversized flat screen is mounted against the wall, and beside that, windows that are almost floor to ceiling and overlook the mountains.

Vivianna drifts to the windows, looking out into the wilderness.

“I’ll never get tired of this sight.”

“Me neither,” I rasp, staring directly at my butterfly.

She glances over her shoulder, a small blush pinkening her cheeks.

I step back toward the kitchen. “Come on, I want to show you the upstairs.”

Adrianna wiggles in my arms as if she wants to get down, and I adjust her, keeping her securely pinned against my body. “I’ve got something to show you, too, kid.”

We make our way silently up the stairs, and I turn right, heading over the balcony. There are two stairs which lead to a door, and I open it wide, smiling when I feel Adrianna tense in my arms.

Finally, I bend, letting her slip down my body. She bolts before her feet have even touched the ground.

“Hades,” Vivianna whispers, glancing around my shoulder. “What is this?”

This is Adrianna’s dream. A completed loft room that’s been converted into an all-you-can-play playroom. It’s filled with anything and everything Adrianna could ever want to play with.

“It’s Adri’s,” I say simply.

“You shouldn’t have.” There’s an almost guilty tone underlying beneath her gratefulness, and I hate it.

I whip my gaze to her, a fire behind my eyes. “Don’t feel bad, Vivianna. Adrianna… she’s my daughter.”

It’s the first time I’ve spoken those words aloud, and I have no desire to take them back. They’ve now infiltrated the space between us, and I watch every emotion cross through her eyes.

Shock. Love. Surprise. Regret. Sadness. Hope.

Love.

I reach out, grabbing onto her before anything else can roll through her overthinking mind. “Quit worrying about it. I’ve felt as if that kid has been mine since I came to see you and her in the hospital. Her biological father will always be a part of her, but I’m her dad now. Don’t fight it, because it isn’t going to get you anywhere. Nowhere good, at least.” I grumble the last bit, and Vivianna’s lips twitch.

My, does she have a dirty mind.

“Vivianna…” I warn, reaching out and grabbing onto her waist.

She clears her throat, disconnecting her eyes from mine. Glancing into the playroom, she sees Adrianna enthralled in a life-size dollhouse with all the furniture inside.

“Adrianna,” Vivianna coos.

Adrianna takes a moment to look up, her eyes sparkling with happiness and a blonde doll clutched in her arms.

“We’re going to take a look around the rest of the upstairs. Would you like to come with?”

Adrianna whips her head back and forth, going back to playing with her toys without another word.

I chuckle, my hand tightening around Vivianna’s waist as I turn her around, pulling her to the other end of the house.

There are a few doors opened, and I point into them without walking all the way inside. “Here’s an office, full bathroom, Adrianna’s room.”

Vivianna pauses at this, her fingers wrapping around the frame as she pokes her head inside the room. It’s decked out in purples and pinks, a princess-themed room that I know Adrianna is going to go insane over.

I keep walking, knowing Vivianna will follow. “And this is a nursery.”

“A nursery?” she squeaks.

I don’t turn around, continuing my walk to the end of the hall where our bedroom door sits closed.

“Yes,” I say, my fingers wrapping around the door handle. I glance at her over my shoulder, not an ounce of emotion on my face. “Because I will put a baby in your stomach at some point.”

She nods, because she already knows.

And that’s the only conversation we need to have about that.

I turn the knob, the plush carpet curling around my bare feet. My hand goes to the wall, and I flick on the light, a warm glow illuminating the room. Our light fixture is abstract, black iron that is both masculine and feminine. I knew it was the perfect light fixture for our room once I saw it.

Vivianna gasps when she sees the bed, and I lick at my lips as I stare at our large, four-poster with a black mesh canopy draping around it. I intertwined fairy lights through them, so it twinkles slightly, a little softness against the black king-sized bed.

“This is… so you.” She chuckles.

I walk up to her, and she backs up, until her butt hits the edge of the bed. I step between her legs, nestled in closely. She cranks her neck back and looks up at me, lust heavy in her eyes.

My hand reaches out, and I caress her chin. “You like your new home, butterfly?”

She nods her head slightly. “It’s beautiful.”

I smirk at her. “It’s just for you. For our family.”

I can feel the growl work its way up my throat. “I’ve got a surprise for you, you know.”

Her eyes flare. “Isn’t the house enough of a surprise?”

I shake my head, turning around and walking to our black dresser. I open up the top drawer, two boxes sitting delicately on top. Lifting them out, I close the drawer gently before turning around and making my way back to Vivianna. Her eyes are glued to the two rectangular boxes, one slightly bigger than the next.

I extend them toward her. “Open them, darling.”

Her finger brushes along the smaller one on top, a gold ribbon wrapped around it.

“Open the top one first,” I rasp, my body humming with anticipation.

She lifts the smaller box into her hands, her fingers going to the ribbon. She pushes it off the edges, releasing the top. Opening it up, a dainty gold chain is nestled into the black cushion, a small ring in the middle.

Reaching forward, I brush my fingers against the feminine collar. “This is so people know you’re mind.”

Her brows pull together slightly. “A collar?”

My cock twitches as I nod. “For my butterfly.”

Her eyes drop back down to the collar, her pointer finger hooking in the front loop. “It’s beautiful.”

I reach forward, grabbing the box from her and trading it for the next. “Now this one.”

She’s less hesitant as she pulls the ribbons off the box, opening up the top.

But the gasp that leaves her warms my blood. Heats it until it’s on fire, roaring through my veins.

“And this collar will be worn in this room, when I want you on your knees. Or your back. Or your ass in the air. Whichever I prefer, honestly.”

She curls her fingers around the thick leather collar, this one heavy, and I can’t wait to wrap it around her neck. The weighted chains clank, extending from the loop in front of her collar. Two chains which connect to thick leather cuffs.

Her fingers brush along every inch of her new toy, and I watch her closely, my body stiffening when I only sense a pleasant satisfaction and anticipation radiating from her.

I lift the collar from her hands, undoing the clasp and opening it wide. I lift my chin, and she leans forward automatically, her fingers going up and lifting her blonde hair from her shoulders.

I wrap the collar around her neck, securing it tightly, though comfortably.

“Stand up, Vivianna,” I command.

She does so without a word, my beautiful butterfly, my perfect submissive.

My fingers go up to her shoulders, her skin warm, tinged with heat for what’s to come. I can guarantee if I reached between her legs, pressing my fingers at the fabric of her black leggings, it would be damp, soaked even.

My fingers curl around the straps of her tank top, and I yank it down. Her small breasts bounce free, the fabric of her tank top bunching around her hips. I grab the material, pulling it down her waist, bringing her leggings with it. Her clothes drop to her ankles, and I take a step back from her.

“Step out.”

It takes her a second, having to pull her feet free from the ankles of her leggings. And then there she stands, naked, creamy skin flushed pink with arousal. Her breasts lift and fall with each of her heavy breaths, her lower lip damp as her tongue swipes against it.

She’s ready. She’s always ready for me.

Stepping forward, I grab the chains, my fingers running down them until I get to the cuffs. One by one I unclasp them, wrapping them around her wrists and securing them tightly.

She extends her hands, the chains brushing across her nipples. They harden into peaks. I grab one between my thumb and forefinger, pinching it until she arches into me, letting out a small cry.

“Get on your knees,” I growl.

She does as I ask, dropping down without a word. Her cheeks flush, her breaths coming out in quick pants. Her thighs tremble as she slightly rubs them together in need.

Breathing in deeply, I can smell her arousal as it fills the air.

With my free hand, I unclasp my pants, shoving them over my erection. It bobs free, a drop of precum glistening at the tip.

“Suck my cock, Vivianna.” She begins reaching forward with her hands, and I grab the chain between her breasts, yanking her forward roughly. “I never said anything about using your hands, darling. Suck my cock.”

She swallows, nodding as she tentatively leans forward, her tongue dipping out as she licks the tip before swallowing me whole. I exhale heavily through my nose as I feel the tip hit the back of her throat.

She pulls back, only to lean forward again. Her throat flexes, and I let out a groan as her mouth tightens around my erection.

“Shit,” I growl. “I’m going to fuck you so hard.”

She groans, the vibrations rolling down my legs. My toes curl into the carpet, a deep sigh leaving me, my head tilting toward the ceiling as I close my eyes and I feel the blood rush through my cock.

Fuck, it feels perfect.

My body starts to heat, and I know that’s all I can take. I haven’t had enough of her yet.

I grab onto the chains, pulling her mouth from my cock. My cock pops free, her lips swollen and glistening as she looks up at me.

Grabbing the chains, I pull her to her feet, spinning her around until her stomach falls on top of the bed. Her ass shakes, and I bring my hand back and forward, my palm connecting with her left cheek.

*Crack.*

Her ass arches in the air, her pussy making an appearance, glistening and begging to be fucked.

I bring my hand down, sliding my fingers between her cheeks until I reach her drenched folds. I drop my fingers in her arousal. Her walls clench around my fingers, and I bring my pinkie to her cunt, drenching the digit before reaching back, filling her pussy and ass with my fingers.

She lets out a loud cry as she arches into my hand, desperate for more.

“That’s a good girl,” I growl, fucking her roughly. She arousal grows even further, dripping down my fingers and wrist, until she’s soaking the sheets beneath her.

I remove my fingers, and she lets out a cry as I grab onto her hips, flipping her onto her back. Her legs automatically fall open. I grab onto the hook of her collar, pulling her toward me until we’re nose to nose, both of us breathing heavily as we stare at each other closely.

Our eyes clash, midnight to green, dark to light, evil to pure.

No, perhaps evil to evil.

“You belong to me,” I growl.

“Yes,” she whispers, her breath warm against my lips.

My nose brushes against hers. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whimpers.

“Good girl.” I release the hook, my hand going to her chest. I give her a soft shove, and she falls onto her back.

My fingers curl behind her knees, and I lift them around my hips. Her ankles hook at my back. I grab my cock at the base, giving it a tight squeeze before tugging the length. I hiss through my teeth, stepping forward until my cock brushes against her folds. I grab the base of my cock, slapping it against her clit a few times, earning a whimper from her swollen lips.

Finally, I give in, pressing forward until I slip in deep, stretching her walls. She lets out a groan at the same moment I do. My hand goes forward, and I curl my fingers around her neck above the collar, squeezing gently as I stare into her eyes.

Eyes that I could get lost into.

Eyes that I want to consume me.

Eyes that bring a man to his knees, one who refuses to bend to anyone.

This is the only person in the world that can possibly make me a weaker man, yet bring me the strength to conquer the world.

“I love you, Vivianna,” I whisper.

“I love you,” she whimpers, arching into me.

I shake my head. “No, Vivianna, I love you,” I urge. “The world has never experienced our type of love. You realize that?”

Her brows pull down, confusion laced between her euphoric high. “How do you mean?”

My fingers release her neck, and as I thrust into her slowly, I drag my hand down the chain in the center of her body, my knuckles brushing against her skin. Goosebumps pop in its wake, until I reach her wrists. I open her fingers, pressing both of ours together.

Her eyes flare, and I know she can feel it. The same electricity I’ve always felt when she’s near.

There’re so many emotions when we come together. It’s almost too much for the world to handle. Our love could be so toxic, and maybe in some form it is. But more than anything, it’s spellbinding. It’s world-altering. It’s intoxicating. Our love can wipe the world clean and start an entire new universe.

Our love is so intense it could combust, and the world would cease to exist.

That is how I feel about Vivianna. Our love is a dangerous love. But no love like ours ever comes easy.

I want to travel through the battleground and earn scars and spill blood if this girl ends up beside me at the end of the road, her fingers laced with mine and her heart in my chest, and vice versa.

There is no other way.

This butterfly was made for me. Scars, trauma, and beauty. I wouldn’t want her with anything less.

“You feel it,” she whispers, her voice trailing off at the end.

I nod.

“I’ve always felt it,” she murmurs, and I settle to a stop, our hips molded together. My cock twitches, but I wait for her words, because I know she has a story of them.

“I’d known you since I was a child, and perhaps I felt something back then, but it wasn’t until I saw you at Carnival de Morte that I felt the electricity that stole my breath. It was as if I died and was reborn. It’s as if my wounds resurfaced and then you healed them with just a look, only a touch. You have broken me down many times, Hades Gray, but I think you are the only one who may be able to heal me, too.”

Blood roars through my veins, and I grab her hip, rolling her onto her side and climbing in the bed behind her. I envelop her body, spooning her as I slip back inside her. She shudders as I bring my hand up, gathering her hair with my fingers and pulling it to the side.

My lips fall to her bare shoulder, pressing against her soft skin.

“I’ll always heal you.”

She presses her backside into my hips. “Will you always break me, too?”

My lips are replaced with my teeth, and I mark her. “Love with me will never be perfect, Vivianna. You do realize that?”

She attempts to glance at me over her shoulder, but I nudge her head, my teeth continuing their claiming of her skin.

“I don’t want perfect, and I don’t just want love, Hades.” She tenses, her hands attempting to reach behind her, but I grab onto the chains, leaving her restrained. “I want… you,” she grunts, trying to fight against me.

I don’t allow her that pleasure, keeping her pinned against the bed. I roll her onto her stomach with my body, her arms pinned beneath. I stay sunken into the hilt, pinning her tightly to the bed.

“Are you sure, Vivianna?” I growl into her ear, my lips brushing from her lobe and down the back of her neck.

She nods her head.

I growl, my hand going to the back of her neck. I keep her pinned to the bed as I get up on my knees, grabbing her thighs and spreading them. Letting go of her neck, I grab onto her hips, thrusting forward the same moment I pull her hips up.

She screams.

“Quiet down, butterfly, unless you want your mini butterfly to find us in this precarious position.”

She rolls her face into the mattress to muffle her moans.

Once I’m certain she’s going to keep quiet, I thrust again, roughly, quickly, slamming our bodies together. Our pace quickens, until our skin slaps and our heavy breathing is the only sound which fills the room.

“Tell me you love me,” I growl.

“I love you.”

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” she whines.

“You’re mine, Vivianna.”

She cries out, and I can feel her tighten around my cock as her orgasm shatters her. I grind my teeth together to not release yet. I only quicken my pace, the restraint of a fucking god as I heighten her orgasm until I’m sure there are tears flooding down her cheeks.

Her body becomes limp, and I know her orgasm has completely drained her. I pull out of her, grabbing the back of the collar and pulling her with me off the bed. She falls to her knees, whether she knows I’m about to command it or her bones have given out on her, I’m unsure.

I walk around her, and just as I expected, damp cheeks with stray hairs stuck to her skin.

“You’re beautiful,” I grunt, grabbing my erection. I give it a pump, and her eyes drop to my cock, an audible swallow filling the space between us.

“Open your mouth, butterfly.”

She does as I ask, her tongue slipping out, as if she’s thirsty and I’m the only thing that can quench it for her.

Her hands dangle in front of her, the chains draped between her breasts, leading up to the thick collar that looks so fucking exquisite on her skin.

I pump my cock harder, and small whimpers slip from Vivianna’s lips, as if it’s a sight she can’t get enough of.

“You like when Daddy tugs on his cock?” I grunt.

She nods.

“What was that?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whimpers.

I speed up my pace, squeezing tightly as I feel myself begin to tense, my body warming.

“You want a taste?” I growl.

“Yes, Daddy.” She rubs her thighs together, as if she’s eager for another round.

I pump myself a few more times before thick, white ropes of cum spill onto her tongue. My free hand goes to her jaw, and I tilt her head down, tainting, claiming, marking every damn inch of her face.

Vivianna is mine. Every inch of her. Every part of her.

I let out a groan as I empty myself into her mouth and across her face, more cum than I’ve had in a very long time.

She does it for me. Always.

I release her jaw, bringing my thumb to her cheek, wiping along a swipe of cum and bringing it to her tongue.

“Suck.”

She does, her lips closing around my digit and sucking. Hard.

My cock twitches.

“Good girl. Always a good girl,” I rasp.

She nods, popping my thumb free. “I love you, Hades. Forever.”

“Good, because there isn’t going to be a fucking day where you’ll be without me ever again.”

# Chapter Nine

## Vivianna

T

he sputtering of the coffee maker reaches my ears, but it’s mostly drowned out by the woman on the TV screen, droning on about another death from the mysterious Carnival de Morte killings.

With the oh-so familiar scent of coffee that surrounds me and reminds me of California, I instantly miss Soren and Rachel. I don’t allow myself to feel bad for myself when there’s tragedy happening across the country.

My heart aches, but I don’t allow myself to feel the pain as the trailer park in Tennessee is mostly roped off with yellow police tape. Officers and detectives walk in the background, a look of disgust on their faces.

I don’t understand it, until the coffee stops sputtering and the voice of the woman on the screen becomes clearer.

“The most brutal slaying thus far. It seems with every murder, the killer is growing bolder. These heinous killings can only be defined as one thing… torture.” She winces, as if she saw a glimpse of what is in one of those homes.

I grab the remote off the kitchen island, flicking off the television.

I don’t even care to listen anymore. My mind is already running a million miles a minute, and if they are saying the killings are worse than a woman being slung up by her neck, cut open and clearly sexually assaulted, minor on the brutality scale, I don’t want to know how much worse it can get.

I shiver, ignoring my steaming coffee, my appetite and anything that could go in my body the last thing on my mind. I’m almost positive it would come back up within seconds.

I groan, swallowing over the nausea as I walk to the back door. Sliding it open, I step out onto the stone patio which overlooks the mountains. Sitting down in one of the chairs, I glance out at the morning sun as it sets over the trees, lightening up the green and creating a glow through the thick branches, and inhale the crisp morning air. The mountains, a combination of green, brown, with white tips where the elevation will never completely melt the snow.

It’s peaceful. And it’s all I need when my anxiety makes me feel as if I have no control.

The sliding door opens, snapping me out of my daze. I glance over my shoulder, seeing Hades walk out in nothing but a pair of sweatpants, one arm carrying a sleepy Adrianna in her unicorn pajamas, the other holding my quickly cooling cup of coffee.

“You forgot your coffee,” he says, his voice concerned.

He knows me too well.

I turn my gaze back to the mountains. “The news this morning pretty much ruined my morning coffee.”

He doesn’t say anything, which says enough.

He already knows.

A shadow falls over me as Hades walks around the table, sitting in the chair across from me. He props Adrianna on his knee, and I instantly open my arms. She wiggles off Hades, walking over to me with messy hair and creases still on her cheeks from her blankie.

“Good morning,” I whisper as I lift her into my arms. I bury my face in her hair, inhaling her pure, innocent scent. She keeps me grounded when I feel as if the world is falling out from beneath me.

“You heard what happened,” Hades murmurs. Not a question, a statement.

I nod, lifting my face from her hair, and glance up at Hades. “The list is getting smaller.”

He gives me a simple nod, and we sit in silence, staring at each other.

Not knowing how close we are to being the next victim, feeling like we’re drowning as we attempt to find out who is murdering the people from Carnival de Morte, how on earth this person is connected to Borris.

Wondering if it’s even possible we survive after all this is said and done, or if our bones will be buried just like the rest of them.

If we’ll just become another statistic, another number to tally.

Hades glares at me. “Stop it. Everything you’re thinking, you need to knock it off. We’re going to figure this out.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know how. We’ve gone over everything I’ve gathered, and it just seems like we keep hitting dead ends.”

Hades sighs, running his fingers through his dark hair, a distant look in his eyes. He’s closed off, a bit cold right now.

He wants me to have faith in him, but when I see a brutal slaying again and again, and I was already a victim to the madness, it’s hard to stay positive when I know how bad it can get.

I’ve been broken before, I can break again.

“I just don’t know how much more of this I can take. I feel like my entire life, or at least as long as I can remember, I’ve been fighting. Surviving. Running. I want the fight to stop.” I glance over my shoulder, up at our home I’ve only had the opportunity to be in a couple days, but I’m already head over heels in love. “I would love it if we could settle down and be happy, finally, and just enjoy our lives. *Finally*.”

Hades’s face softens with understanding. Leaning forward, he grabs my hand, his warm skin enveloping mine. He gives my smaller hand a squeeze, looking certain with whatever words he’s about to say.

“Whoever is killing these people, we need to find out who they are, Vivianna. We need to figure it out, and I need to take care of them. I’m not going to be able to relax or enjoy our lives, when your life is at risk, when there is a possibility that Adrianna’s life is *at risk*.” He spits the words from his lips, clear rage in his eyes as he thinks of Adrianna being in harm’s way. “I’m going to kill whoever decided to rise from the ashes, and then that house behind us will be our safe space, and we’ll finally be able to be a family. The one you want.”

“What about what you want?” I don’t want him to do this to only please me, only for him to sacrifice the things he wants.

“I want to be with you, butterfly. In any way, I just want to spend my life with you.”

My heart soars, the remaining, broken butterflies in my chest flapping their bent wings in glee. We may be a bit scarred and imperfect, but my heart still beats for Hades. It always has. It always will.

The butterflies will still flutter their beautifully imperfect wings.

I nod, biting the inside of my cheek so I don’t burst into tears.

Hades pulls his hand back, standing out of the chair. “I’m going to call the guys over. We’ll go over everything we have and decide our next steps.”

With that, he walks back inside, leaving me, Adrianna, and the cool mountains in the distance in silence.

In peace.

~

Staring at the papers in front of me, the pile having grown from Hades doing his own research, and the notebook laid out in the center, with every name we could possibly think of written on the lines, it just all seems like too much.

But the guys don’t see it that way.

They look hungry, like great white sharks about to catch their prey. They’re eager to attack the papers in front of them and figure out who it is killing these people.

Though, it’s not that easy. It’s not as simple as picking out a name and determining that’s the person or narrowing it down with a process of elimination.

I’ve tried that. To me, I’ve tried it all.

There is no connection to Borris. Not one that I can find. He’s the only connection there is to the killer, and all the connections to Borris are dead, at least that I know of.

Which to me, means the killer is not connected to Borris. And how do you find a killer with that information? It could be literally anyone.

“I think I’ll just leave you guys to it.” I go to push the chair back, but Hades slams his hand on the back of the chair, keeping me in place.

“No, because then you’re going to ask about a million questions later. Sit here, don’t do anything. If you see anything or if anything comes to mind, let us know.”

And that’s how the next two hours go.

Four cups of coffee, and about a million bathroom runs, my eyes are burning and my head hurts from listening to the guys talk about every guy who has ever worked at Carnival de Morte, at least since they’ve been there.

And to be honest, I don’t think they’re any closer to figuring out who the killer is than when they started.

“I feel like this is going nowhere.” I want to cry. My eyes even water a little bit, tired of going through this.

Carnival de Morte doesn’t even exist anymore. Can’t it all just die just as Borris did?

Alastor shakes his head. “It’s not going nowhere, Viv. Look at this.” He lifts a sheet of paper, with about two dozen names crossed off. “We know, for sure, it isn’t any of these people.”

My brow furrows. “How? How can you just assume?”

“They are dead, or they were confirmed to be in completely different locations at the time of the killings. Every time. These people aren’t it, which means…” He drops the piece of paper and lifts another. This one with about thirty names on it. “It’s one of these.”

I blink at him. “That’s a lot of people. Are we supposed to wait for another three-dozen people to die before we figure it out?”

I prop my elbows on the table, digging my face in my hands. I’m glad Adrianna is taking a nap, because my temper is thinning by the second. “It’s just taking too much time.”

“Villain, you need to cool it. We’ve got it figured out.” This comes from Brennan, who speaks to me from the kitchen. His voice is muffled with his head inside the fridge. He pops out, holding a beer and a White Claw. Walking up to me, he slams it down on the table.

I tilt my head to the side in confusion, but still open it, even though it’s only after lunch.

Taking a healthy sip, I wait for them to decide their next move.

Kennedy points at the paper with possible suspects. “Most of them are located in the lower half. Carolina and Florida, specifically. I think we need to head out there for a couple days. Scope things out around these spots.” His pointer finger slams down on the map, where red dots are bunched along South Carolina and eastern Florida.

“If the killer keeps with his timing, we might be able to catch him before his next kill,” Liam murmurs, deep in thought.

Hades looks over at me the same moment I look at him.

“I can pack a bag for Adrianna and myself,” I suggest.

They all laugh. All of them.

Hades narrows his eyes at me. “You aren’t going.” He says the words so simply, so calmly, they brook no room for argument.

My palms slap against the table. “Okay, so what am I supposed to do? Sit here and knit a sweater? This is the shit I’m talking about, Hades. You want me involved when it suits you. You don’t ever want me in on the actual investigating.”

Hades’s lips quirk, and it makes me so damn irritated. “Sure, go get one of those backpacks that you can strap Adrianna in, and we’ll just walk around murder sites. Sound good to you? Sound safe for Adrianna?” He barks out a laugh. “You’re ridiculous. Stay here and enjoy our home, and we’ll be back in a couple days.”

I hate that he’s right. I hate it so much.

“Fine, but this trip better be worth it. If you guys come back with a dead end, maybe we should just drop this entire thing.”

One by one, the guys get up without a word, walking away and out the front door.

And then it’s just Hades and I, staring at each other from across the table.

“You’ve got a mouth on you,” he clips.

I take another sip of my White Claw. “It’s nothing you haven’t already known.”

His lips quirk. “Yeah, I kind of want to stick a gag in between your lips to quiet the sass.”

Another sip, my limbs beginning to loosen. “I think you should pack your bag and go figure out who’s killing people so we aren’t next.”

His face drops, a lick of irritation in his gaze. “When I get home, I’m tying you to the bed for twelve hours. Teach your ass some manners.”

I lift my White Claw in a cheers toward his back as he heads toward the stairs. “See you in a few days, love!”

“Better grab some cream if you go to the store at all,” he barks at me, his voice echoing throughout the house.

My face scrunches up. “Cream for what?”

“For your ass, because it’s about to be bright red. It’s going to hurt, baby.”

I roll my eyes even though my thighs clench together in need.

I hate him sometimes, but fuck do I love him.

“I’ll put it on my list!” I shout.

His voice is barely audible, though I can hear the very distinct, low rumbling laugh from his chest.

“I know you will, butterfly.”

~

Toys picked up.

Check.

Dishes done.

Check.

Groceries picked up, including soothing skin cream.

Check.

I tap my fingers on the island, completely out of things to do. Maybe I should start looking for another job. I have a hunch it would be a battle with Hades, but sitting around here with nothing to do is going to get boring, quick.

It’s been two days with the guys gone, and this house is as clean as it could possibly get. I’ve gone to the nearby park with Adrianna about three times today, to the point she’s now asleep face down on the couch with *The Little Mermaid* playing on the TV.

There is nothing else to do.

I guess I could read.

A rumble outside has me stepping down the hall and looking out the front door.

Mail is here. I guess that’s something I could do.

Slipping my sandals on, I disarm the security system and step outside, the cool breeze instantly bringing goosebumps across my arms.

I run my fingers up and down my arms as I head down the driveway, giving a small nod to the mailman as he drives away in his small white truck.

Opening my mailbox, I pull out the small stack of mail, slamming the door shut as I make my way back up the driveway. I finger through everything, seeing bills and junk mail, and a home décor magazine that I’m sure I’ll be thumbing through tonight.

At the bottom of the stack is an envelope without postage on it, but what is there is my name.

*Vivianna.*

It’s written in a messy scrawl I’m unfamiliar with. I stare at the envelope as I walk up the sidewalk and back into the house, glancing over my shoulder and around the neighborhood before shutting the door and locking it.

I punch in the security code, setting the system with shaky fingers.

I’m suddenly nervous, and I don’t know why.

Though I do, because I know who this is from. Somehow, I know.

As far as I know, there has been no letters or messages to other victims. No premeditation with these killings.

So, it would be silly to think this is from the killer, but I just know. I know it is.

Dropping the remaining stack of mail on the counter, I keep the envelope in my hand as I walk to the table, sitting down and flipping it over.

Sealed perfectly.

I slide my finger underneath the corner, tearing into the white envelope with ease.

A piece of lined paper, folded up, sits inside.

I clench my teeth together, glancing around me.

I feel like I’m being watched, even though I know I’m not. I’m so uneasy, and I really wish Hades were here. I contemplate calling him, but if this is nothing, and I’m freaking out, he’s going to get pissed.

No, I should leave him alone. He’s dealing with his own digging. I can’t bother him right now.

With a deep breath, I pull the piece of paper, shoving the envelope to the side and gripping the lined paper in my fingers.

Fuck it.

I unfold the note, my eyes reading the black, messy marker inked across the paper in disgusting, foul, threatening words.

*Vivianna Finch, so pretty and blonde.*

*I see you, with the false strength in your eyes.*

*You pretend to be strong.*

*How strong will you be when bruises once again mark the insides of your thighs?*

*When I tear you apart from the inside out?*

*Do you really believe you will be strong when I tear your heart from your chest with my bare fingers?*

*When your beautiful black and white house is painted red with your blood?*

*And when the only thing you can feel is pain, perhaps I’ll keep you alive while I separate your limbs with a knife after I bury it into your womb.*

*See you soon.*

I gag, and take a deep breath, attempting to keep my food from the day inside my stomach. My fingers shake, *no*, my entire body trembles, convulsions that barely keep me in the chair I’m sitting on.

My fingers release the paper, and it floats to the table, the words staring at me in thick, dark letters.

I hate him. I hate whoever wrote that so much.

Am I really not as strong as I seem?

A cry breaks from my chest, and I slap my palm over my lips to not wake up Adrianna.

I don’t know what to do. No, I do. There is only one thing to do.

I need to call Hades.

# Chapter Ten

## Hades

S

orry, I hope you understand we had to do this, just to make sure,” Kennedy says.

I shake my head, using the towel to wipe off the blood coating my fingers.

I glance up at Carlton, one of the guys I wasn’t close to at all at Carnival de Morte, and we felt as if he was a viable suspect.

Though, he’s not it. He’s not the killer.

Carlton stands from the chair, his face barely recognizable with the bruises, swelling, and blood trailing off his chin. He clutches his broken wrist against his chest, looking at us with hate as he hobbles out of the empty warehouse we found in the middle of nowhere.

“Fuck!” Liam curses once Carlton is gone. He shakes his head, anger written across his face. “I thought for sure it might have been him.”

I nod my head. “Me too.”

“Doesn’t matter, either way,” Brennan shrugs, pulling the piece of paper from his back pocket with bloody fingers. He crosses off Carlton’s name. “We’re five more people down. A little over two dozen to get through.”

Yeah, but we can’t just hop locations for the next week and a half and assault everyone on the list.

Tossing the bloody rag on the ground, I pull out my pack of cigarettes and spark one, clutching it between my teeth as I walk toward the door of the warehouse. The humid air of South Carolina clutches my lungs, and I can barely breathe as I inhale a deep drag of my cigarette.

A palm slaps against my shoulder, and I tense as Alastor steps up beside me. “This shit sucks, Hades. I agree, but it’s to keep Viv and Adri safe.”

I know. That’s the only reason I’m doing this.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out, my body tensing as I hope it’s not another call for another murder. Another miss on our part. It’s about the time another killing would happen, and I’d been hoping we’d find him beforehand, but no such luck.

Though, it’s Vivianna’s name that pops up on my screen, which makes me even more confused.

It’s after midnight in Colorado. Vivianna is usually long asleep by then.

“Vivianna, what’s wrong?” I ask after I connect our call.

“How’s it going down there?” Her tone is casual. Way too casual.

I take a drag, exhaling the smoke through my nose. “Tell me why you’re calling me in the middle of the night. What’s the matter?”

Silence on the other end. Such silence I pull the phone away from my ear to see if our call is still connected. It is.

“Vivianna,” I bark. “Speak up.”

“I received a letter.” She says the words so softly, barely audible. I almost don’t understand her words until they roll through my ears a few times, and then I understand.

“A letter?” I pull the phone away from my ear and hit the FaceTime button. It takes a few minutes for it to connect. I expect to see Vivianna in bed, but she’s not. She’s sitting at the kitchen table, and she looks awful.

Overly stressed. Worried. Scared. Like she’s been drinking coffee and panicking most of the day. It instantly puts my guard up, my body tensing into stone.

“Show me the letter,” I order.

She sighs, her face falling before she turns the camera toward the table. There’s a small lined paper laying in the center of the table, and Vivianna’s shaky hands make it impossible for the camera to focus on the words.

“Stop shaking, Viv!” Alastor barks.

I can feel the rest of the guys come up behind me, all of us glancing down at my screen as Vivianna calms her hand, the words finally coming into focus.

I read the words, the blood draining from my face as I digest the threats that make me more murderous than I’ve ever felt in my entire life.

I reread the letter multiple times, more than I’d like to read those words, but I allow them to become engrained in my brain.

“Motherfucker. I’m going to kill whoever wrote that, and kill them again. And again. And keep fucking killing them until there aren’t any bones left,” Alastor snaps, walking away without another word. I can feel his body vibrating.

“Villain, you okay?” Kennedy asks softly.

Vivianna turns the camera back around, and this time I see her glistening eyes, filled with tears, though she refuses to allow them to fall. “I’m okay. Just a little shaken. Have you guys found anything?”

I shake my head. “When did you get that letter, Vivianna?”

“Today, when I went to grab the mail.”

“Postage on the letter?”

She shakes her head. “Someone had to have dropped it in our mailbox.”

The killer was there. At my fucking home.

I take a deep breath, feeling like I’m seconds from cracking. “I’ll call you back in a second. Don’t do anything.”

I disconnect the call without another word, swiping to my security app.

“What are you doing?” Brennan asks.

“Checking the cameras,” I mumble.

I go back to last night, when it started to get dark. The idiot wouldn’t be so stupid to drop it in the mailbox in broad daylight, though, maybe that’s what he wants me to think. I speed up the camera, watching as the night passes. I speed up the seconds faster, until the night is flying by.

“Stop,” Liam says. “There.”

I hit the play button quickly, and the camera slows just as a black figure walks up the street. I can’t make him out, it’s too dark outside and the man keeps his face toward the ground, covered in black from head to toe.

He walks up the street, acting like just a midnight walker, which is suspicious enough, but once he nears my house, he slows down.

He refuses to look up.

As if he knows he’s being watched.

I memorize everything about him. His size, the way he walks, the clothes he’s wearing.

It’s difficult to make out who it could possibly be, but I store every detail into my memory, knowing it’ll be useful at some point.

He digs into his front pocket, and I squint as he pulls out a small white envelope, stopping at the bottom of my driveway.

Motherfucker.

He was way too close to Vivianna.

Much too close to Adrianna.

My fingers grip my phone with such strength I’m worried it’s about to crack. Loosening my hold, I watch as the man walks up to my mailbox, his gloved fingers pulling open the door and slipping the envelope inside.

He keeps his head lowered the entire time.

Once the mailbox is closed, he quickly turns around, making is way down the street at a much quicker pace.

“This isn’t good,” Brennan groans.

“He’s tall. We might be able to narrow that down,” Liam suggests.

“True, but he also could have paid someone to deliver that letter,” Kennedy says.

“No,” I grumble. “It’s him. I can tell.” My jaw aches as I clench so hard my ears start ringing. “He went there right when we were leaving town. Like he knew I wouldn’t be home.”

How? Who the fuck is this person? Are they really smarter than the five of us?

I swipe out of my security app, hitting Vivianna’s name. She answers on the first ring, her face twisted in concern. “Where’d you go?”

“I’m coming home.”

Her eyes go wide. “Why?”

“What? Why?” Liam asks. “We’ve got more people to look into.”

I tear my gaze to Liam. “Because, Liam. The killer isn’t here. The killer is in Colorado.”

Everyone goes silent as realization hits. We’re here, where the killer is supposed to be. But the killer isn’t here. The killer is by my butterfly, and none of us are there to protect her.

“Shit,” Liam says, his face falling.

I turn my gaze back to Vivianna, who looks about ten million times more freaked out now that I verbalized my fear. “It’s going to be okay, Vivianna. Stay in the house. Keep the alarm on. We’ll be home soon.”

“We should have come with you,” she growls. “We would have been safer together.”

Perhaps, but I never would’ve risked that.

Though, now I’m creating another risk.

“You’re fine in the house. You’re safe inside the house. Go to sleep. We’ll be there when you wake up.”

She nods, a tear finally slipping free and falling down her cheek. “I hate this. I just want it to be over,” she whispers.

I bring my finger to the screen, wishing I could wipe away the tear. My face falls, my heart shattering in my chest. I need my butterfly. “I know, darling. It’s all going to be over soon. I promise.”

She shakes her head. “You can’t promise that.”

“I can, and I will. Go to sleep, Viv. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She groans, wiping away her tears in frustration. “Fine, okay.”

“Hey,” I bark at her.

She drops her watery eyes to me.

“I love you, butterfly.”

Another tear falls.

“I love you too, Hades.”

Chapter Eleven

## Vivianna

I

’m worried my feet are going to wear into the new flooring, but my anxieties run high, to the point I had to call the babysitter—someone Hades vetted ten times over—to come and pick up Adrianna. She woke up this morning, instantly picking up on my panic, and I knew I couldn’t have her here when the guys came home.

Hell was going to break loose, and I didn’t want Adrianna to have to witness the fallout. She’s been through enough.

My throat is clenched tightly, my palms constantly clammy, and every blink pulls back a wave of tears which threaten to break free. I don’t allow myself to fall, even if I am teetering on the edge. One swift gust and I’ll tumble recklessly to the bottom.

And honestly, I’m not sure what I’ll find when I get there.

The soles of my feet ache, and I want nothing but to walk to the living room and fall bonelessly to the cushions and sink in deep. My body weeps for it, yet I stand strong, walking to the table and clutching the back of the wooden chair, staring down at the mystery note that I had to flip over a few hours ago.

I couldn’t bear to glance at the words another second.

What am I going to do?

What are we going to do?

The thought of fleeing has become engrained in me. At times, it seems it’s all I’m good for. When things get tough, run. Pretend the past could possibly stay in the past, even though it always seems to catch up to me in every destination.

I need to face this. All the demons of the past. It’s time to grab them by the throat and pull them up to me with courage.

What is courageous about running? Absolutely nothing. And it feels as if it’s all I’ve ever done since my mom died. I’ve been running.

I’m done running.

My fingers pulse with pain from the pressure of my grip, and just as I’m unlocking my fingers with a hiss of pain, the front door bursts open, five grown men barreling through and rushing toward me.

Hades is first in line, his eyes focused, dark lasers as they stare at me with a mixture of anger and love.

Possession.

He doesn’t say a word as he storms up to me, his long arm swinging out, curling around my neck as he hauls me to him, my blonde hair threaded between his fingers. His thumb pushes against the base of my skull, directing my head toward him.

In a second, our lips collide, possessive against submissive. I allow him to take control, nudging my mouth open with his. His tongue dives between my lips, digging deeper as his fingers clutch the back of my neck tightly.

He will never let me go.

I never want him to let me go.

After seconds which feel like hours, he pulls back, his eyes inky black pools. He glances around the living room, and I instantly know he’s looking for Adrianna.

“Where’s Adri?” he asks slowly.

I blink up at him, suddenly a bit nervous, though I’m not sure why.

“Um, Bianca took her for the afternoon.”

His jaw clenches as he takes a step back. “I asked you not to leave the house.”

My brows pull together. “I didn’t leave. I had her picked up.”

His head tilts to the side, as if he can’t understand my answer. “Having you not leave the house includes Adrianna. She isn’t safe out there, Vivianna. What the hell are you thinking?”

I swallow, the lump in my throat suddenly larger than it was seconds ago. A panic starts to rise, my hands shaking at my sides.

“You think she’s going to get hurt?” I whisper.

Hades’s jaw clamps down, and his eyes narrow in irritation at the direction my thoughts are going. I can’t help it, the way he states us being in danger makes me believe Adrianna is at risk.

I can’t bear that thought.

His hand clamps down on my shoulder, his fingers digging into the muscle. It’s not painful, but I can feel the tension rolling through his arm.

“Adrianna is fine. You’re going to be fine. It’s all…” He sighs, turning his head away from me briefly. I watch his jaw tic on repeat.

*One, two, three, four, five.*

Turning his gaze back to me, he looks positively livid as he removes his hand, squeezing his fingers into a fist as it falls to his side. A waft of his manly scent whips through my nose, and if I wasn’t so on edge, I’d possibly melt on the floor at his feet.

“I need you to calm down. Alastor will be back in a minute with Adrianna, and I need you to just… go sleep. You look exhausted, and how worked up you are isn’t going to help us right now.”

I blink at him, anger raising the hair on my arms.

“You do realize I just received a death threat, right?” I point to the table, where the worn piece of paper lays crumpled.

“Villain…” Kennedy says from behind me.

I raise my hand, not wanting to hear a word out of any of them.

“No,” I clip, shaking my head. “You guys can’t get your way every time.”

Brennan chuckles. “You pretend like you have a choice in the matter, Villain.”

I whip around, my body coiling tight with anger.

These guys think it’s a game, bossing me around. Thinking they can do as they wish with me. Perhaps years ago, at Carnival de Morte, I would’ve listened to them like a scared pup, but that isn’t me anymore.

I’m not frail, and I don’t need a wall of guards surrounding me. I need help taking down the weirdo who is threatening me and my daughter.

“You guys are annoying as hell, and I’m not listening to you anymore.”

I turn around, storming away from all of them.

A chuckle cracks from one of their chests, and a growl above it.

The growl comes from Hades.

I don’t turn around, though I can feel the heat of him as he comes up around me. Strong arms wrap around my waist, and I’m lifted over his shoulder. My spine arches, and I let out a shout as I bounce awkwardly bent over him.

“Hades, put me the hell down right now!” I scream, my voice bobbing with each one of his steps.

Cackling starts up from behind me, and I bend my head, my eyes connecting with the three assholes’ upside-down smiles.

“I hate you all,” I growl.

Liam smirks devilishly. “We love you, Villain.”

I raise my hand into the air, lifting my middle finger as I scowl at them the best I can from my awkward position.

Hades storms down the hallway and up the stairs, and I give in eventually. There is no use in fighting against Hades. If he wants to have his way with me, he’s going to. It’s pointless to fight against him.

Walking into the bedroom, he heads right to the four-poster bed as his hands go to my waist. He gives me a squeeze before lifting me in the air and dropping me onto the bed.

Pointing down at me, he scowls. “Go to sleep. It’s not any help to us when you’re all worked up.”

I lean up, my fingers squeezing the comforter as I snarl. “I’m not worked up. I’m worried about Adrianna. I figured we were safe. I’m just trying to help figure everything out. That’s all I’ve been trying to do from the beginning.”

He shakes his head, his fingers combing through his messy hair. “You’re safe, butterfly. You’re always safe with me. Both you and Adrianna. But she’s safer here, where I know where she is. I don’t want the babysitter watching her anymore unless she’s here, or until everything is taken care of. Understood?”

I give a short nod.

He sighs, his face falling as a flash of love passes between us. “Butterfly…” he groans, stepping up to the edge of the bed. I instantly scoot forward until my legs hang over the edge, his in between mine. I reach forward, my fingers clutching his jeans as I look up at him.

He looks down at me.

We become locked in the trance. Our forever trance. My breath catches in my chest as I stare at him. His hand comes forward, his fingers circling around the nape of my neck. He clutches me tightly.

“Give me a kiss, butterfly,” he murmurs, pulling me forward as he bends down.

Our lips collide. I gasp into his mouth, and he uses it to his advantage. He groans lightly into my mouth, his tongue darting out and sliding against mine. I whimper, grabbing onto his thighs, wanting more of him.

Always wanting more and not sure how or why I can’t get enough of him.

A million years with Hades would never be enough.

I only want more. I always want more when it comes to him.

And as always, it isn’t enough. He pulls back, his fingers grazing across my neck as he releases me, pushing me back gently.

“Go to sleep, Vivianna, and please, listen to me,” he orders with a dark shadow in his eyes.

I swallow, my mouth watering and parched at the same time as I soot back on the bed.

I’m helpless when it comes to this man. His forever submissive.

“Will you let me know when Adrianna gets home?” I ask as I slide under the covers. My body instantly melts into the mattress. I didn’t realize how exhausted I was. How much I needed Hades to be home with me.

He nods, walking to the doorway and flipping off the light. All I can see is a shadow of him, and my body twitches with arousal.

He’s so attractive.

“I’ll let you know, darling.”

Before he can even finish his sentence, my eyes have fluttered closed and I’m falling asleep.

~

I wake up to a breeze hitting beneath the covers, followed by a warm body colliding with mine. Warm lips press against my neck, the scruff of his beard creating shivers along my spine.

“Adrianna is home, sleeping in her bed.”

I murmur, barely awake, the only thing I can feel is the way his fingers awaken my soul.

His fingers skate down my body, curling beneath the waistband of my pants. He tugs them over my hips and down my thighs.

“Did you guys figure anything out tonight?” I murmur incoherently, a moan breaking at the end of my sentence.

He chuckles, his hands skating between my legs. His fingers slip between my folds. “Quit talking, Vivianna.” His fingers plunge inside me. He curls them, pressing against the spot inside me that has me seeing stars.

I let out a moan, my head digging into the pillow. His lips come down on my neck, his tongue skating out as he sucks on the skin. His fingers work me roughly, knowing exactly how to turn me into a puddle.

He has me drenched within seconds.

I squirm beneath him, my mouth open on a gasp as he pulls his fingers free.

“Please,” I whimper.

He chuckles, rolling up until he’s hovering over me. He grabs my shirt, pulling it over my head in one quick tug.

“Quit moving, butterfly, or I’ll have to punish you.”

I smirk. I can’t help it.

He growls. “It won’t be a punishment you enjoy.”

I swallow. *Well, shit.*

He grips my hips, flipping me over until I’m on my stomach. His fingers span across my backside, digging into my skin as he drags them down my thighs and up to the small of my back.

“On your knees.”

I do as he says, arching my back so my ass sticks in the air.

He grabs my thighs just above my knees, wrenching them apart until I’m spread wide.

He groans softly as his fingers skate against my inner thighs, just below my sex. “You’re glistening.”

I push into him, wanting more. Desperate for more.

*Crack.*

His palm lands against my backside, a quick slap that leaves a pinch of pain and an overwhelming amount of pleasure.

“What did I say?” he snaps.

“Don’t move,” I pant.

“What do you say?”

My tongue twists in my mouth, and I fumble with my words.

*Crack.*

“What do you say, Vivianna?” he barks.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper, my ass cheeks on fire, yet somehow it only leaves me dripping between my legs.

I can feel him move off the bed, and I glance over my shoulder and watch him move to the dresser. He opens the top drawer, pulling out rolled-up pieces of silk.

“On your back.”

My knees give out on me, and I flip onto my back, laying there with heaving breaths.

He walks toward the bed, and my eyes drop to his jeans, my mouth watering at the sight of his erection straining against the zipper.

Jesus.

He bends forward, his fingers circling around my ankle. He gives me a quick tug until I’m lying in the center of the bed.

“I feel as if I’ve told you countless times to sit still, and you can never seem to listen to what I tell you. What do you think of that?” he says softly, though his words are sharp as glass as he unravels one of the rolls of silk. With ease and precision, he begins wrapping my ankle to the post of the bed.

He’s tying me up.

His eyes lift as he finishes making the knot. It’s tight.

“Hm? I expect an answer, butterfly.”

He moves to the other edge of the bed, grabbing my other ankle as he begins wrapping that one as well.

“It’s difficult…” I whimper, my body jolting as he tightens the second knot. “Keeping still when I’m so… aroused. When I’m so attracted to you.”

He chuckles, though his blank facial expression doesn’t change in the slightest.

His lips quirk as he glances up at me briefly before tightening the knot on my ankle one last time. “I thought perhaps you just like to irritate me.”

I swallow, the walls of my sex tightening.

I want him so bad.

He moves up the side of the bed, his fingers curling as he beckons for my wrist. I extend my hand, which he gently wraps around with one of the silk pieces.

“My body responds before my mind, Hades. I can’t help what you do to me.” I turn my head to the side, and I can’t fight the smile that lifts the corners of my lips. “Though I do like to irritate you at times.” I chuckle softly.

He quirks a brow. “Sometimes?” He tightens my wrist once more before moving to the other. I extend my hand to him before he can reach that end of the bed.

He holds my wrist in his large fingers, his pointer finger skating against my palm. “And then there are times when you’re such a good girl for me.”

My eyes grow heavy. “I like being a good girl for you,” I whisper.

His finger presses heavily into the center of my palm. “You are such a good girl for me, my little butterfly.”

I whimper, attempting to pull my legs together. I want to squeeze my thighs together, relieve some of this pressure that is continuously building, yet the ties leave me unable to move my legs an inch.

“See, even now you’re attempting to move. When will you learn, butterfly?”

My face grows red, hating how my body responds to him so intensely. I can’t contain my desperation for him.

He stands up straight, moving to the foot of the bed. I’m spread wide at this angle, and he can see all of me. Every inch of my body that hums for his touch and the control he gives.

“Should I punish you tonight, or reward you?”

My tongue rolls around inside my mouth, wondering how I should respond. A punishment to me is a reward. I enjoy all sides of him, but if he knows that, perhaps it’s the reward I’m looking for.

I tilt my chin up slightly, remaining confident while my insides burn.

“Reward.”

His eyes darken as his hand goes to his belt. With an expertise that has the butterflies in my stomach flapping their obnoxious wings, he slides his belt from the loops way too slowly. He grabs the end, wrapping it around his knuckles. I watch his knuckles flex and tense, my teeth instantly biting the inside of my cheek. The tangy taste of blood soaks my tongue, but I’d rather have the bite of pain than moan as loudly as I feel I need to.

He drops his pants and his briefs, his erection bobbing free in the dim lighting. This time I do moan, the sight of his straining erection, glistening at the tip, something I’ll never tire of.

“Do you see something you like, butterfly?” he rasps, stepping forward.

I bob my head, unable to form any words.

“Maybe if you’re a good girl for me, I’ll let you have a taste. Would you like that?”

Another bob of my head.

“Words, Vivianna.”

“Yes,” I croak.

“Yes, what?” His eyes narrow, irritation evident.

“Yes, Daddy,” I whimper.

His dark eyes glow.

“Good girl.”

He reaches behind his neck, grabbing his plain black t-shirt and pulling it over his head. His abs flex, his tattoos dancing along his abdomen and torso, all the way over his hips and down his thighs.

I curl my toes, my knees beginning to shake in anticipation.

He moves up until his thighs brush the soles of my feet. His reaches forward, grabbing onto my ankle, his fingers dancing lightly along the skin. I shiver, trembling so heavily I want to sob.

Bending down, I can feel the warmth of his breath caress my skin. He presses his fingers in deep, a possessiveness in his touch.

“I think I’ll give you both.” His lips connect with my ankle, warm and soft, though his kisses are rough, commanding as he moves from my ankle and down the top of my foot. My toes curl once again, though his fingers are there, prying them until they are straightened. He grabs my big toe, warm breath creating goosebumps along my skin.

He bares his teeth, looking animalistic as he clamps them down around my toe.

He scrapes it along my skin, his tongue sliding across behind his teeth.

My back arches, though the rest of my body is confined by my constraints. A loud, guttural moan breaks from my throat, ripping through the room.

He slides up my body, hard as stone, muscles twitching as he bites my ankle. My calf. Below my knee.

Each bite harder than the last. Each one spent a little longer against my skin, creating love bites as he begins sucking, turning my skin from a flushed pink to a deep purple.

He makes it to the crease of my leg, between my thigh and my hip, and I can’t help the squirming from the combination between pleasure and pain.

Slap.

His palm cracks against the side of my breast, my nipples hardening into peaks.

“You will learn to be still, butterfly, until I tell you otherwise.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. It’s too much. Overwhelmingly too much.

He growls, continuing his ascent as he travels up my body. He bites my hip, sucks against my stomach just above my belly button. He scrapes his teeth against my rib cage.

Until he reaches my breast, and his one hand goes to my nipple, tweaking it, pulling on it. It feels good. It hurts so good.

My lower lip slips between my teeth, and I bite down until blood is drawn, surprised I’m able to keep still against the mattress. Beneath Hades.

His mouth falls across my other nipple, and he sucks. Hard.

“Ahhhh,” I moan, tears of pleasure blurring my vision. My fingers and toes curl, wishing I could grip onto him, hating being trapped, yet loving it all the same.

My nipple pops free from his mouth, his lips glistening as he glances up at me briefly before dropping back down, his teeth scraping along my collarbone and up my neck, his teeth sinking into my chin.

My body is slick with sweat, throbbing from pleasure mixed with his love bites.

A shadow falls over me, my eyes drifting up to his. His eyes are black, his body coiled tight as he stares down at me.

My lips slip open, a gasp of breath slipping from me as I await for whatever he intends to do next.

He does nothing besides stare at me, entrapping me in our forever trance. His dark eyes capture my light ones, our breaths mingling in the same space. We’re unable to look away from one another, trapped in a timeless moment where only the two of us exist.

His hand comes up to my jaw, tracing along the bone and beneath my lower lip. He presses his thumb down, my mouth slowly falling open.

“My butterfly, my wings, my heart,” he rasps.

I swallow, my tongue poking out and dragging along my lower lip. My tongue skates across his thumb, and I can taste the saltiness of his skin.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

My lashes flutter against my cheekbones. “You know I am.”

“I want to hear you say it,” he says lowly.

“I am yours, Hades,” I whisper.

“Every inch of you,” he confirms.

I blink up at him, telling him with my eyes what he already knows.

I am his. I belong to Hades Gray.

His eyes heat, and I swallow over the ever-growing lump in my throat. He slips down my body, his hands dragging across my skin. Over my hips and along my thighs, until his hands press against my knees. He pries them apart as far as they’re able to go. Cool air brushes the skin between my thighs, kissing my sex.

“You’re drenched, baby girl. Is this for me?”

My cheeks flame. I move to close my legs, but he puts pressure on them, keeping me wide open.

“Tell me,” he growls.

“I’m always wet for you, Hades.”

His eyes narrow.

“Daddy,” I breathe.

He clenches his jaw, and I can feel his erection twitch against my leg.

“Good girl.”

Bending down, his tongue lands on my clit, and he flicks it hard. Once, twice, three times until I’m unable—incapable of sitting still.

My back arches, a moan screeching out of me.

Slap.

His palm slaps at my sex, my cunt throbbing.

This is absolute torture.

“Move again, and I’ll let you stay wet and tied up all night, writhing for an orgasm that will never come.”

“Please, no,” I cry.

“Then don’t. Move,” he clips.

I lick my lips, my chest shaking in nerves.

He dives back down, his tongue sinking deep into me before he moves up to my clit. He sucks hard, his tongue flicking in a steady, fast rhythm that has my insides exploding in pleasure.

He drags his hand down, slipping three fingers into me, stretching me until I feel a pinch of pain.

Curling his fingers, he pulls them out before plunging back in. Every thrust is quicker than the last, harder. Until my body shakes against the bed, his tongue and fingers working me into a frenzy. I can barely see, unable to breathe as he spirals me toward the cliff.

I’m about to break into dust.

He drags his teeth against my clit before lifting his head, his lips swollen, glistening. “Here is your reward for being a good girl.” Moving back down, he sucks my clit into his mouth, his tongue rapid against my sex as I peak over the cliff, feeling myself split at the seams until a scream tears from my chest, tears slipping from the corners of my eyes as I fall apart yet become whole at the same time.

He rides my high, plunging his fingers into me knuckle deep, extending my orgasm until it becomes painful. He moves back, though he keeps his fingers in me as he reaches over and releases my ankles. My legs drop, exhausted, trembling. I feel nearly drunk on pleasure as he grabs my legs, lifting them into the air. I watch his dark eyes as he grabs his erection before lining himself up and sliding straight inside me. My walls clench tight, still feeling the intensity of my orgasm.

He groans, his fingers tensing around my ankles until he grabs one in each hand, spreading my legs wide.

His eyes drop to where we connect, a heavy breath pouring from his nose as his fingers tighten around my ankles. He speeds up his thrusts, pounding into me so viciously the bed knocks against the wall.

Blood pours into my mouth as I contain my scream, feeling another orgasm filling every limb in my body.

He pulls out quickly, and I’m near screaming at him when he grabs my hips, flipping me onto my stomach. My arms cross, stretched to their limits, but he doesn’t give me long enough to adjust as he lifts me onto my knees and sinks back in to the hilt.

He stretches me in this position, and I can feel every inch of him filling every inch of me.

I swallow down my gasp as his hand grabs my ass, spreading my cheeks.

“Ugh,” I groan, drowsy with pleasure.

*Crack.*

His palm falls across my ass in a quick slap before he drags his hand forward, curling his fingers around the front of my neck. He pulls my head back, until the back of my skull connects with my shoulder. Turning my head, I glance up at him a moment before he drops his lips to mine. Our kiss is lustful, filled with passion and greed as we attack each other.

His thrusts speed up, pounding into me as if he wants to claim my insides as well.

Pulling my head back slightly, he keeps my head cocked below him, our eyes connected as he watches me.

Puckering his lips, my own fall open as he spits in my mouth.

“Good fucking girl,” he growls, grinding into me.

Every thrust gives me undeniable pleasure. The kind that you want to escape because you don’t know how to contain it all. It’s overwhelming, and I don’t even attempt to slow down my orgasm as it comes roaring to the surface, breaking me into pieces.

“Get my cock wet, Vivianna. That’s it,” he grunts, speeding up his thrusts until he reaches his own orgasm, emptying himself inside me with a long, guttural groan.

My eyes nearly roll into the back of my head at the sound of his pleasure. It’s euphoric.

He releases my neck, dropping his lips to my shoulder as he slowly pulls out of me. He breathes heavily, our skin slick with sweat as we come back to earth.

Reaching up, he undoes my wrists. They drop to the bed, red markings along my skin where he tied them tightly.

I wince, pulling them into a more comfortable position as I roll onto my side.

He slides off the bed, his fingers lingering on my skin as he looks down at me.

“I love you, butterfly.”

I smile slightly. “I love you, too.”

His eyes narrow. “Now, for your punishment.”

My body tenses. If that wasn’t a form of torture, I don’t want to know what is.

I say nothing, and he bends down, pulling on his briefs and jeans, leaving the rest of his clothes on the floor at the foot of the bed.

“You aren’t leaving the house until we find out who did this.”

I instantly pop up on the bed, grabbing the sheets and covering myself as anger comes over me. “What do you mean I’m not leaving the house? You are not making this a prison, Hades.”

“Punishment.”

My eyes flare. “Why?”

“Because you work me up on purpose and misbehave. This is me being Daddy, telling you who’s in charge.”

I swallow, somehow turned on beneath the anger.

“I don’t work you up on purpose,” I say.

His jaw clenches. “You do. But it’s more than that. It’s a win-win for me. Because here, I know you’re safe. You and Adrianna will be safe here, and I won’t have to worry.” He smirks slightly. “And I know you’ll be fucking pissed at me and I can spank your little ass later when you’re all worked up.”

My jaw works back and forth, wanting to fight him on this, though knowing it’ll only lead to probably another punishment, which I have no energy to endure.

“I’m mad at you,” I growl, flopping back on the bed.

He chuckles, his voices quieting as he makes his way toward the door.

“Good, butterfly. Good.”

I huff, wrapping the sheets around me as exhaustion finally hits. I feel as if I’ve been hit by a truck, so much stress and insanity going on in my life these last few days, weeks, hell, months even, and it feels as if it all hits me at once. My eyes fall closed, and I’m instantly about to fall asleep when I hear Hades call my name.

“Hmmm?” I mumble, unable to even open my eyes.

“I love you, Vivianna. But not just with my heart, but with every inch of me. I can feel my love for you in my fingertips, in the way I breathe, in the way my stomach ached when I was away from you. I love you so fucking much, butterfly, and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep you safe. If that means making you a prisoner until I know you aren’t at risk, I’ll deal with your fury. Because the alternative isn’t something I’ll ever allow to happen. Do you understand me?”

I swallow, his form blurry from my tears.

“Yeah,” I croak.

He nods. “Good. Now go to sleep. I love you, darling.”

“I love you, Hades Gray.”

More than he will ever, ever know.

# Chapter Twelve

## Hades

I

stand in the doorway, watching my little butterfly bundled underneath the covers. She lets out a small sigh, the plush comforter lifting slightly before molding around her slender form.

My fingers grip the doorframe, tensing slightly as my heart lurches.

I want to be everything for her. Everything and more.

Sometimes I feel as if I don’t deserve her, though I’m selfish enough to keep her all for myself. I tried to watch her, let her be free and live her life.

I failed miserably, standing on the sidelines and waiting for her wings to give out on her.

Arms wide open, ready to catch her.

She’s caught, and the locks of my arms refuse to release her this time.

So I need to do right by her. She deserves the world. She deserves more than the world, but I suppose all I can do is give her what I can.

With a sigh, I unlock my fingers from around the frame and reach for the knob, pulling the door closed. I leave it open a crack, because I never want to put a full barrier in between us again.

I head down the hall, stopping at Adrianna’s door a moment, peeking inside, my soul settling when I see the miniature child curled into a ball.

Perfectly peaceful. Safe.

My girls are safe, and that’s all I need.

Heading toward my office, I nudge the door closed with the toe of my foot before making my way to my desk. I sit down with a heavy sigh, the leather letting out a whisp of air as I sink into the cushion.

Fuck.

Leaning forward, I grab the empty glass on the edge and the bottle of Glenlivet next to it. Uncorking the top, I pour myself a healthy two fingers before pushing the bottle aside.

Tipping the glass back, I swallow down half the contents and hiss out a breath as I sit the crystal down.

Princeton is out of the picture finally. One demon of Vivianna’s is down, in the dust, the bones buried.

One more demon.

This demon eats her from the inside out. I can see the fear clutch her silently, weighing her down, drowning her in anxiety.

She hides it well—most times.

She needs a reprieve. More than the death of her ex, Adrianna, or I can give her.

Vivianna deserves happiness, and though I’ll hand her anything she wants on a platter of bones, I know my butterfly possibly better than she knows herself.

I know what she needs.

It’s risky. Everything is risky right now.

But Vivianna—her happiness is worth everything.

I lean to the side, pulling my phone from my pocket and punching in the passcode.

I know what I need to do.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Vivianna

S

unlight burns across my eyelids, and I jolt, squinting as I burrow myself farther under the covers.

Letting out a small groan, I stretch beneath the covers, feeling deliciously sore in the best way.

A small smile falls across my face as I grab at the covers, pulling them down to my neck. I glance to the other side of the bed, hoping to see Hades laying there, but his side of the bed is empty. Though in its place is a set of clothes.

My clothes.

I frown, rolling over and grabbing them, hearing the crumpling of paper crunching between them.

My hand buries between the fabric, and I pull out the small scrap of paper. Unfolding it, I instantly smile at Hades’s handwriting.

*Butterfly,*

*Get dressed and meet me downstairs.*

*Love,*

*Hades*

I tear the covers off me, racing across the bedroom with goosebumps littering across my body. I jump into the shower, getting ready as quickly as I possibly can as thoughts run through my mind at all the possibilities of what Hades might have in store for us today.

A million and one ideas run through my mind, each one causing a bigger smile to lift my lips in a smile, until my cheeks ache fiercely.

I get ready in record time, slipping on my black ankle boots next to the bed and rushing toward Adrianna’s room.

She isn’t there.

I check the playroom next, which is also empty, and for once, cleaned up.

I make my way downstairs, my confusion only growing when I hear silence.

Turning the corner, I glance around the main level and find it empty.

“Hello?” I ask, my voice echoing through the house. It leaves an empty feeling in my chest, and for the first time ever, this house feels a little too big.

My enthusiasm deflates slightly as I walk toward the garage, pausing when I see the sight in front of me.

Hades bent over his bike, a cloth in his hand as he wipes the front windshield.

He glances up when he sees me, a delicious smirk crossing his face.

“What took you so long, butterfly?” he murmurs.

I walk down the steps, making my way slowly toward him. “I was getting ready. Where’s Adrianna?”

“Gone. With the boys for the day.”

I blush, my mind instantly turning to dirty thoughts.

He hums, the vibrations crossing the garage and hitting me straight against the butterflies in my gut.

“Are you taking me somewhere?” I ask.

He stands up to his full height, dressed in black jeans and a leather cut, a black shirt molded to his chest beneath. His tattoos peek through in every direction, and I swallow down the moan working its way through my throat.

He tosses the rag on a nearby chair, not saying a word as he swings his leg over the seat of his bike. He turns toward me slightly, his eyes nearly black. “Hop on and find out.”

My eyes widen. “You’re taking me on a ride?”

The only bike ride I’ve ever gone on was at Carnival de Morte through the park. Never a real ride.

He nods once, and I jolt across the garage, my hand gripping his shoulder as I swing my leg over. This isn’t his bike from Carnival de Morte.

This is a Harley.

Large, custom, and so sexy. It fits Hades perfectly.

He turns his bike on, twisting toward me slightly. “Hold on tight.”

Revving the engine, he reverses out of the garage and down the driveway. My heart beats a million miles a minute. Heading down the street, he’s quick on his bike as he heads toward the highway. It gives me no clues as we make our way out of the city and toward the mountains.

The wind whips through my hair, cool and crisp. I burrow my face between his shoulder blades, feeling the muscles in his back move and flex with every movement.

He whips us down the road, and we end up traveling into the mountains. The hills are steep, the curves sharp as the mountain breeze pinkens my cheeks. I grip Hades tightly as we fly down the road and farther into the mountains. Hades keeps me warm as the air grows cooler. I can feel the love radiate between us to the point my breath catches in my chest, my dried eyes burning with unshed tears.

Warmth against cool, and love against so much emotion.

I choke the hiccup in my chest as Hades turns off the highway, making his way through a small Colorado town.

The fast pace of the highway turns into a low rumble of his motorcycle as he rolls through the small town. I try to look for a sign that might say what town we’re in, but I can’t see one. It’s as if it’s a mystery. I give up on my search, settling in against the back of Hades as we head farther up the mountain.

The musky, cool scent of him wafts into my nose, and I inhale deeply, the back of his hair tickling my cheek.

He slows down, taking a wide turn around a curve and heading down a narrow road right into the woods. The temperature instantly cools, the sun hiding behind the thick foliage, the scent of pine heavy in the crisp air.

He slows down, nearly to a stop as he turns down a hidden road. Gravel kicks up behind the bike, and I watch in awe as we move through thick trees that slowly thin into a little cabin, a large stone chimney with smoke billowing out of the top.

He slows his bike to a stop by the side of the house. A small stone home that can’t be more than a bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Though, it’s cute all the same, and I smile as he turns off his bike and slips off, holding his hand out to me.

“What is this place?” I ask, spinning around and seeing nothing but trees.

“An oasis. For you, butterfly.” I turn toward him and see his back as he’s making his way toward the front door. I scurry toward him, confused about how he found this place, or why we’re here.

“What do you mean? I ask, my feet pressing against the wooden steps, each one a little warped, creaking with my weight. It’s aged, and I love that. It feels loved.

He stops at the door, his hand on the worn wooden knob with a small smile on this face. “I’ve got a surprise for you. I wanted you to be free, even if it’s only for a little bit.”

With that, he turns the knob, swinging the door open and stepping inside.

And sitting on the couch are Rachel and Soren.

Tears instantly spring to my eyes, and I forget about everything as I rush through the door. Both of them stand up, and we meet in the center of the room, three bodies crashing together in an overwhelmingly tight hug.

“Oh my God,” I cry, burying my face between the two of them as I attempt to control my emotions and do a terrible job.

Soren chuckles. “You look good, Vivianna.” Her hand goes between my shoulders, and it only makes me cry harder. It still feels weird, having her call me by my real name.

“You do. You look happy.” Rachel chimes in. “Though, I’m kind of pissed it took so long for you to reach out. I think I’ve been sitting by my phone every day.”

I lift my head, wiping the stray tears on my cheek as my brow furrows. “How did you guys even get here? How did you know where we were?” I glance over at Hades, realization smacking me in the face. “You set this up?”

He gives me a single nod, his eyes narrowed slightly.

“Yeah, he called us in the middle of the night last night and said he booked two tickets straight to Colorado, and we only had a couple hours to pack.”

I stare up at Hades, and all he does is shrug, reaching out for my wrist. “Let me talk to you for a minute, and then I’ll leave you guys for a while to catch up.”

He pulls me away without a second thought, into the small bedroom off to the side, closing it softly with his hand.

He wraps his arms around me instantly, pulling me in close. “Happy?”

I nuzzle into his chest. “More than you could ever imagine.” Glancing up at him, I tilt my head to the side. “How did you pull it together, though? How did you even know their number?”

He quirks an eyebrow, and only then do I realize what a stupid question it is to ask. Of course, Hades can practically do anything he sets his mind to.

“How long are they here for?” I whisper.

“Only the afternoon.” His chest rises and falls. “I’m not sure what’s safe for them, and what isn’t. So I need to keep it short.” He reaches out, his fingers wrapping around the back of my neck. “Plus, I need some time with you here, too.”

My neck flames red, my lashes fluttering against my cheek. “Okay.”

Pulling my face up to his, he presses his lips against my forehead. “I’ll be back in a few hours. I need you to do something for me, though.”

My eyes lift to his, waiting.

A seriousness overcomes his features, and my throat grows thick as reality comes crashing in this private oasis.

Life outside these walls is chaos right now, and I know he’s about to remind me of it.

“Don’t say anything about the murders, Carnival de Morte, Princeton, or anything else that could put them, or you, at risk. Do you understand?”

I nod instantly. “Of course.”

He blinks. “Like, not a fucking word, Vivianna. It’s life or death.”

I take a shaky breath. “I know,” I croak.

He nods. “Good.” Placing a kiss on my forehead, I close my eyes as I feel his warm lips press against my skin. “I love you, butterfly.”

“I love you, too, Hades.”

With that, he steps back, opening the door. I glance out, seeing both of the girls once against sitting on the couch, though they’re turned and staring straight at us.

“Ladies,” Hades mumbles coldly as he walks toward the door. He doesn’t say another word as he slips it open, giving me one more look before shutting the door behind him.

“What. The. Fuck.” Soren barks the words at me with a shocked tone. My eyes are still glued to the door, hating any moments away from Hades. I want to surround myself with him all day long. Any amount of distance feels like a tear in the deepest depths of my soul. Each inch farther away from me is another tear in my chest. Another drop of blood slipping from my veins.

The butterflies in my chest flap their wings wildly, as if they’re fighting for release to go to the one I belong to. They also hate the distance.

“Val—Vivianna!” Soren’s hand grips my bicep, and she gives me a slow shake to rip me from my trance. I glance over at her, both her and Rachel looking at me in confusion. “Care to update us on what’s going on?”

I shake my head, knowing I can barely tell them a thing, but knowing they need some kind of update.

“I’m so glad you guys are here,” I sigh, not sure what else to say.

Rachel’s lip twitches with emotion as she slides across the couch, wrapping her arm over my shoulder. “I’m glad we’re here, too. Are you doing okay?”

I nod my head, tears breaching the edge and falling down my cheeks. I wipe it away with the back of my hand, hating how emotional I suddenly feel. “I’m good. Really good, actually.”

“Do you know what ever happened with Princeton? We’ve been trying to creep on his job and your old house, and it’s like he disappeared off the face of the earth.”

Because he did. He’s dead.

Is it public news? Or did the authorities keep it under wraps. He doesn’t have much family, but I know they’re going to do a funeral and stuff at some point. Wouldn’t they put out an obituary? It has to be something I can share with them, right? As long as I don’t give them all the details.

“Princeton… he’s… no longer here.” My eyes drop to my thighs, and I can feel the tension thicken in the room, making it impossible to breathe.

Rachel clears her throat. “He’s dead?”

My eyes slowly lift to hers, and I give her a small nod.

“So, I have, like, five hundred questions…” Soren starts, eyes wide.

Rachel waves her away. “No, Soren. No questions.”

Soren scowls at her.

I swallow over the gigantic lump in my throat. “I can’t say anything,” I choke out.

Soren laughs awkwardly, as if she just realizes why the tension is so thick. “Got it,” she clips.

“Well, at least tell us what’s new with you?” Rachel chimes in, attempting to diffuse the situation.

I pull my leg up onto the couch, trying to relax. It’s just Soren and Rachel. It’s just my friends. *Act like their friend.*

“Nothing is new. Not really.” Besides a killer on the loose who is sending me handwritten threatening notes. “Hades bought this house for us. It’s brand new, and it’s literally so gorgeous. You guys would love it. It’s tucked in front of the mountains, so there’s literally a direct view of the mountains. Adrianna loves it there. She has her own playroom and loves going in the backyard.”

Rachel smiles. “It sounds perfect for you. Do you think we can see it?”

I wince. There’s a reason Hades had them come here and not there.

It’s for their safety.

Rachel nods. I think she understands more than I’m saying, or that she’s letting on. “Understand. Maybe next time?”

I smile lifts the corner of my lips. “Definitely next time.”

Soren bursts from the couch. “I’ve got an idea.”

Shit.

“Let’s drink!” She rushes to the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of red wine and three wineglasses. “I’m pretty sure I saw a twelve-person hot tub out back. We should get drunk and sit in the hot tub in the middle of the woods. Literally nothing sounds better.”

“Agreed.” Rachel nods.

I reach for the glass Soren hands me. “How is work going?”

She lifts her head, bent over, her hair falling in front of her eyes. “I hate you for handing the reins over to me, and love you at the same time. It was a lot to learn in, like, three seconds. You do understand that, right?”

I nod, guilt settling in. “I’m sorry.”

“Soren,” Rachel whispers.

Soren loosens up a bit. “I’m sorry. I was really overwhelmed there for a second and was so angry with you. But actually, I’ve gotten everything under control now, and somehow, business has been insane lately. You know the next door laundromat?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, it was pretty gross.” And it’s the truth. I’m pretty sure that building was one of the first to be built on that street, and it just needed a complete gut… like thirty years ago.

“It went out of business.”

I take a sip of my wine. “Oh, thank God.”

Soren laughs, taking a sip of her own drink. “Yeah, but I’m actually thinking about purchasing it, renovating and breaking down the walls to make the shop bigger. I can maybe bring in some local live music on the weekends or something.”

I stare at her in shock. That’s an amazing idea.

“I love that, Soren. That would be awesome. I think you should do it.”

She smiles at me from behind her glass. “I already did. They start the renovations next week.”

My jaw drops, and I stand up, wrapping my arms around her shoulders. “You’re so amazing. I knew it was the right idea to give the shop over to you.”

She gives me a quick smile before stepping back, wiping her cheek. “I’m glad you think so. I do, too, you know, even though I was pissed at you.” She flaps her hand in front of her face. “Okay, that’s enough. I’m going to go change and hop in the hot tub. Are you guys coming?”

“I am,” Rachel says, shoving off the couch.

I tilt my head to the side. “I didn’t bring a swimsuit.”

“Got you, Vivianna. I brought like five,” Soren shouts from down the hall.

I laugh. Of course she did.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Hades

I

walk up the steps, hearing the giggling and sniffling coming from the other end. I called about an hour ago, letting Vivianna know Rachel and Soren's taxi would be arriving shortly to pick them up. Their time must have gone too fast, because she was quickly upset with me with how soon they had to leave.

I hate doing this to her, but she should be happy I allowed this in the first place. It isn't a safe time for her to be hanging out with her friends, but I knew she needed it, so I did what I could to make it happen.

Which includes either sitting around the corner for half the day or having one of the guys take my place. Someone was watching over the small cabin at all times. They were safe, and no one was at risk.

But we can't spend our time watching over a cabin so Vivianna can hang out with her old girlfriends. She has all the time in the world to spend time with them once we catch whoever is doing the Carnival de Morte killings.

I gave her these few moments, and now it's time to go back to the real world.

My knuckles rap on the door a few times before I turn the knob, seeing the three of them in some weird circle, their arms tangled together as they hold on to each other.

The crackling of rocks pop behind me, and I turn around quickly, seeing the local taxi rolling down the graveled road.

"Your ride is here," I tell the girls.

Rachel looks up at me, always apprehensive, and I don't blame her. I'm not the best for Vivianna, but I'm what she wants, and she's what I want.

And I'm never giving her up.

"Thanks for letting us come here, Hades," Rachel says, not totally friendly, but not overly hateful either.

Soren bends down, grabbing her backpack and tossing it over her shoulder. Her hair is wet, and from the look in her eyes, she maybe had a little bit too much to drink.

"Next time, make it a little bit of a longer trip than twelve hours?"

I smile stiffly at her. She's bossy.

I don't like bossy.

"Of course," I grit, stepping to the side.

The three of them hug once more before I clear my throat. Stepping aside, the two tipsy women step onto the porch and down the steps, making their way into the taxi.

"I'll call you soon!" Vivianna shouts, a slight slur in her tone. I lift a brow, turning to glance at her.

Little butterfly is a bit tipsy herself.

The two girls slipping into the taxi nod. Moments pass as the doors close and the taxi turns around, rolling down the road and back into the darkness of the trees.

I hear a sniffle behind me, and turn around, seeing Vivianna's lower lip puckered as a few tears slip from her eyes.

"Come here," I mumble.

She doesn't hesitate, rushing into my arms. Her head buries between the space of my chest and arm, letting out a shaky breath, her emotions heavy.

"This was supposed to be a good thing. I didn't want to make you sad."

She shakes her head against my chest, shifting back slightly to look up at me. Her eyes are a bit dazed, glossy, and red from both the wine and her emotions.

"I am happy. It's just hard to see them go. I used to have them every day to talk to. I don't have that anymore."

"Someday, perhaps you can. But right now, Vivianna, it's not safe. Not for them to be here long term, and it's not safe for you to travel. We need you here, where I can watch over you and know you're okay. Do you understand that?"

She nods, her lower lip wobbling.

"Good," I mumble, nudging her backward. "I know it's hard, but it's not going to be like this forever."

"I know it's not," she sniffles, crossing her arms over her shoulders as she makes her way back to the couch. She plops down on the corner, letting out a sigh as she tilts her head back against the cushion. "Thank you, Hades, for letting them come here."

"It's my pleasure, butterfly."

I walk over to her, grabbing her ankles and sitting next to her, draping her legs across mine. Her skin is still a bit damp from the hot tub, her fingers against her thighs pruney and red from the heat.

But beneath the sadness is a relief, a happiness.

She needed this.

"Come here," I murmur, reaching around and wrapping my fingers around the back of her neck. My fingers tangle through her wet tresses, pulling her toward me until our lips collide. I can taste the sweet, smoky flavor of red wine on her lips. My tongue swipes against her lower lip, causing a moan to escape her lips, and she opens her mouth on a gasp. I dip my tongue into her mouth, sliding my tongue against hers.

She's a little wobbly as she moves forward, swinging her leg bravely over mine, straddling me. I smile against her lips, releasing her hair and bringing my hands down to her waist. I grip her tightly, holding her against me as I kiss her deeply. She presses against me, and I can feel her hardened nipples as they graze against my chest.

"How long do we have this place for?" she moans against my lips.

I slide my hands underneath her thighs, lifting her up and holding her against me. I walk to the back door, still propped open, which leads to the hot tub.

"We have the place for the night."

She leans back, a dark glimmer in her eyes.

With the toe of my black boot, I nudge the door open and slip through into the cool air. Fairy lights line the roof, dangling across the hot tub. Releasing her legs, she slides down my body until her bare feet slap against the wooden deck.

Reaching down, I grab the hem of her sweatshirt and pull it over her head. She's naked beneath, her breasts bouncing lightly against her chest. She shivers, goosebumps rippling down her arms and stomach. I nod my head toward her waist. "Drop your pants, butterfly."

She hooks her thumbs beneath the waistband of her pants, pushing them over her waist and thighs. Kicking them aside, she stands before me naked, a little tipsy, and so damn beautiful.

Wrapping my fingers around her waist, I lift her into the air and step toward the hot tub. Swinging her over the edge of the tub, I drop her inside the rolling waters. She falls to her knees on the seat, watching me with a heavy dose of lust.

Her eyes follow my hands as I strip my clothes off, leaving myself naked, a half erection hanging between my legs.

She licks her lips.

I shake my head slightly, turning around and heading back into the house. I can hear her sigh behind me, the sloshing of the water against the wall of the hot tub.

Heading inside, I make my way toward the kitchen, grabbing the bottle of scotch sitting in the corner of the counter. Grabbing a glass from the cupboard, I make my way back outside, spotting Vivianna still waiting for me just where I left her.

She looks up at me. "Scotch?"

I chuckle, swinging my leg over and hissing out a breath as the water sloshes against my shins.

"You aren't the only one who feels like having a drink tonight, butterfly."

She laughs, sliding up against me and resting her cheek against my shoulder. "It really is beautiful out here."

Pouring myself a glass, I reach over, setting the bottle on the steps and tipping my glass back, taking a healthy sip. I wince at the strong, bold flavor as it slides down and heats my throat, tilting my head back and looking up at the trees.

"It's peaceful."

Vivianna's hand slides across my chest, warm and dainty as her nails settle against my pec. "I'm so glad you came after me in California, Hades. I don't know where I'd be without you."

I sigh, closing my eyes briefly.

Everything that's happened the last few years has aged me. I feel bone-tired, slightly weary. Vivianna is a part of that. She's been worth every second, but love takes a lot out of you.

I've had to watch my love threatened, battered, raped, and degraded. I've watched her disappear and had to chase her across the country, standing on the sidelines while I watched her begin a new life without me.

I did it all, knowing at some point she'd come back. And she did, because she was supposed to. It was the most restraint and patience I've ever had, but I was able to find it in myself to do it for her.

"This is destiny, butterfly. We're exactly where we're supposed to be."

"I don't ever want a moment like this to end," she whispers.

I tip my glass back, drinking the rest of the amber liquid before setting the glass next to the bottle. My body is loosened after an entire day of watching Vivianna and her friends from a distance, leaving me feeling like I was transported back in time, back to California. Where I could never get too close, but I could always see her.

She was always there, just never close enough.

"We'll have the rest of our lives to live out moments just like this one." I grab her by the waist, lifting her onto my lap. I brush my fingers against her cheek, pulling the strands sticking against her skin. I brush them behind her ear, my little butterfly’s ivory skin tinged lightly pink.

"You're so beautiful," I rasp.

She tilts her head to the side, her hands reaching up and wrapping them around the back of my neck. The tips of my fingers play with the edges of my hair. I pull her close, our warm, naked bodies brushing up against one another.

"You're handsome," she whispers.

"Kiss me, Vivianna," I command softly.

She doesn't waste another second. Leaning forward, she presses her lips against mine, softly, quickly turning greedy. She takes what she desires, which is everything and more. I give her this moment, letting her take charge of what she wants. Her hips start grinding, and I can feel the arousal between her folds as she slides against my thighs.

My erection grows, thickening to stone between my legs.

With a snap, I lift her off me, spinning her around and pinning her against the wall of the tub. Her breasts press against the top, her nipples hardened to peaks. I reach forward, gripping one between my thumb and pointer, squeezing tightly, tugging on it until she lets out a soft cry.

"Fuck," she whimpers, leaning forward, as if she can't get enough.

I release her nipple, and she mewls like a feral animal as I step behind her. I reach below the water, gripping her ass and giving it a tight squeeze. She lets out a guttural moan, her fingers curling around the edge of the hot tub as if she needs something to keep her tethered to earth.

Keeping my hand on her ass, I reach forward, grabbing the bottle of scotch and pouring myself another double. Tipping the glass back, I swallow half of it in one go.

Releasing her ass, I drag my fingers around her leg, hooking them beneath her and lifting her body up, so she’s propped half over the hot tub ledge. Her legs are spread, pussy wide open for my viewing pleasure.

I take another small sip of my scotch before dribbling the remaining on her ass, watching as the amber liquid slips over her crack, into the depths and crevices of her weeping sex.

I drop the glass into the water, hearing the plunk before it sinks to the bottom of the hot tub. Leaning forward, I press my tongue and lips against the swell of her ass, licking up my favorite flavor against my other favorite flavor. It’s a combination which is heady and erotic, and I realize I’ve never tasted anything better.

I groan against her skin, sinking my teeth into her skin before dragging my tongue down her crack. She shivers, both from the pleasure and the crisp air, until my tongue presses against her tight hole.

One I’ve never breached, but have been craving.

My tongue swipes against it, and she shivers, tensing slightly while letting out a squeaking moan.

“Hades…”

I grunt behind her, my cock throbbing between my legs as I go lower to her dripping cunt. It tastes like sweet sex and bold whiskey. I groan, sliding my tongue deep into her sex, my fingers dragging forward, the liquid dripping down her goosebump-laden skin.

I sink three digits far inside her, curling them upward. Vivianna arches, her eyes rolling in the back of her head as her head tilts back, the tips of her hair brushing the edges of the water.

She shivers as I fuck her hard, rocking her body against my wrist. It’s erotic, watching her small body rock so heavily against my hand. She’s fucking beautiful, high on her arousal.

Pulling my fingers free, I grab her head to face me, sinking my three digits between her lips.

“Taste yourself, baby. The best flavor on earth, your arousal with a hint of whiskey.”

She opens her eyes wide, her tongue rolling around my fingers as she starts to suck on them.

“Good girl,” I rasp, turning her body around while keeping my fingers deep in her mouth. She moans around them, the vibrations rolling from my wrist and all the way to my cock.

I line myself up behind her, sinking my cock deep into her pussy. Her walls tighten around me, and she lets out a feral moan around my fingers, screaming into the dark forest.

“That’s it, butterfly. You’re such a good girl for Daddy, aren’t you?” I growl behind her.

She nods her head, small whimpers and moans leaving her mouth. I press my fingers against her tongue, feeling a small gag in her throat before I withdraw my fingers.

*Crack.*

My damp hand slaps across her ass, the hot water sloshing around us. I grip her hip with one hand, my other going around the front of her neck. Gripping her tightly, I hold her against me as I pound into her. It’s hard, demanding, as I tear into her.

She lets out a scream, a mixture between pain and pleasure rocking against her. Her body trembles wildly, as if she's losing her grip on reality.

My orgasm desperately races toward the surface, and I grit my teeth, grinding them together as a moan escapes my lips. I tighten my grip around the front of her neck, feeling her throat spasm against my fingers.

I can feel Vivianna's walls flutter wildly around my cock, tensing, attempting to milk every last drop out of me.

And I can't take another second. I can feel her release tear through her, the same moment I break apart.

The heat of the water splashes around us, pouring over the edge of the tub. Sweat drips down the back of my neck and spine. I snarl, baring my teeth as my butterfly arches in pleasure, her own orgasm taking her to new heights.

I continue pumping into her until I can feel her limbs begin to loosen, her body beginning to sink into the water. I swoop her into my arms, holding her against me as I lift myself out of the tub. The air is cold against my warm skin, and I hurry into the house, shutting the door and locking it behind us.

Vivianna shivers against me, and I walk to the side of the room, in front of the grand stone fireplace. It makes up most of this small cabin, but the fireplace is one of the reasons why I chose this place.

It's perfect.

I keep Vivianna against me as I reach over, pulling the blanket from the back of one of the chairs. Doing what I can one-handed, I lay out the blanket in front of the fireplace, pulling the pillows from the couch before I settle Vivianna down on the blanket.

She shivers, still wet and covered in goosebumps.

"Give me a second, baby."

Working as quickly as I can, I go to the side of the fireplace and grab some firewood. Stacking them inside of the ash covered-fireplace, I use the lighter and fire starter. It only takes seconds for the fire to grow, the wood perfectly dry and crisp. It pops, sparks floating up the chimney.

The room quickly grows warm, a smoky scent filling the air.

Vivianna sighs, rolling on her side. Her green eyes glow from the fire, her body relaxed and limp.

I'm not finished with her yet.

Sinking down beside her, I adjust the pillows and slide my arm underneath her, pulling her against me. Her forehead presses against my lips, and I breathe her in.

My butterfly.

"I'm glad you flew to me all those years ago. I'm glad I caught you."

She tilts her head up, looking at me with love. Only love.

"I'm glad you kept me."

Possessiveness and protectiveness overwhelm me. Rolling over, I pin myself on top of her, giving her enough breathing room while remaining as close as I possibly can.

"And I'm never letting you go again."

Her eyes glisten, the shadows of the flames bouncing behind us, glowing her skin, then basking it in dark.

"I don't want you to," she whispers.

Shifting myself, I nudge her thighs open as I settle between her legs. I sink in deep, both of us simultaneously letting out a soft groan.

I keep my eyes on her, our gazes locked on one another. I couldn't look away, even if I tried.

We move slowly, as if our dance is in line of that of the flames.

We move as one, as love.

Reaching up, I brush my fingers through her hair as we rock into each other.

She's so beautiful. The most beautiful butterfly I've ever seen.

Sliding my fingers down, I brush my fingers against her cheeks, cupping both of them in each hand as I lean forward, pressing my lips against hers.

I can't even tell how long we move against each other for.

Minutes. Hours.

All night long.

It never ends.

I never want it to end.

But it eventually does, with our skin slick with sweat, and both of us filled with so much love I can barely see straight.

I orgasm with words of love against her lips, and she sighs, echoing my thoughts with words of her own.

I roll to the ground, pulling her so she slides on top of me, wrapping my arms around her tightly, locking her against my body. My nose goes into her hair as my eyes settle closed, and it's only love I feel in the air.

"I love you, Vivianna," I whisper, half asleep.

"I love you, Hades Gray."

# Chapter Fifteen

## Vivianna

I

'm cold.

So, utterly cold.

Yet my heart is warm.

"Look, Mommy!" Adrianna screams as she races around the yard.

Our first snowfall.

Adrianna's first snowfall, ever.

She's amazed at the white fluff falling from the clouds. She isn’t even bothered by the cold weather today. Bundled up in a purple coat and snow pants, she waddles around, her mittens forgotten across the yard as she tries to pick each snowflake from the sky with her small hands.

“I want to make a snowman!” she shouts at me, her nose bright red.

I shake my head, my face burrowed in a scarf. I understand I’m a Colorado native, but living in California for the last few years, I’ve completely forgotten about what freezing actually feels like.

“There isn’t enough snow on the ground for a snowman, Adri,” I laugh. Sad truth for Adrianna is, it’s supposed to warm up tomorrow, so whatever lands on the ground tonight and actually sticks, will be water for the trees by tomorrow afternoon.

She frowns, her brows buried beneath her kitty cat hat. “How about a snow angel?” She plops on her back, and I jolt, wondering if she hurt herself. But moments later, she starts moving her hands and legs against the wet grass, as if an angel will somehow appear behind her.

I start laughing, moving toward her with stiff knees.

"Baby, you aren't going to be able to make a snow angel. There isn't enough snow on the ground."

She stops, her arms and legs spread eagle as she scowls at me. "It's snowing. I want to have fun in the snow, Mommy!"

Crouching down, I wipe a melted snowflake off her rosy cheek. "I know, and you're going to have plenty of time to do that this year. I'm so happy that it's finally snowing and you get to see it, I just don't think it's cold enough yet for us to get so much snow to play in, though. When it does, we'll have a whole day of fun. We can even go sledding or something. Would you like that?"

Maybe Alastor would take her out. He was a big snowboarder back in the day.

The cold has never agreed with me.

She nods her head slowly, still disappointed.

I smile at her. "Why don't you go inside and take your stuff off, and I'll make us both some hot cocoa? Extra marshmallows."

Her eyes light up, the snow debacle completely forgotten. "Okay!"

She rolls over, having a difficult time getting up in her oversized coat. I righten her to standing, and she giggles, hobbling off toward the back of the house.

Pressing my hands against my knees, I shove myself up, letting out a sigh as I look up at our house.

It's home. This is finally, home.

I haven't felt as if I've had a home since my mom's house, and it truly didn't feel like a home after she passed.

It's been a long time.

Adjusting my scarf, I loosen it a little and breathe in the evening air as I step toward the house.

And the flood light on the side of the house comes on.

I pause, the grass crunchy beneath my boot.

I stay where I am, pausing as I tilt my head to the side, wondering if it's somehow a deer, or a coyote. We've been having some more recently with the weather cooling down.

I see nothing, hear nothing, so I continue on my walk back inside, when I hear a crunching of frozen grass.

Another pair of boots.

My eyes widen as I turn my head to the side, seeing a man dressed in black from head to toe.

Face mask on, glasses over his eyes.

Not an inch of him is showing.

I swallow, my body locking up when I know I should be doing the opposite. I should run for my life.

I reach behind me, for the gun Hades has demanded I keep on me, only to find my pants empty.

I blink slowly.

I left it inside.

Hades is going to kill me, if I make it out alive.

"Stay away," I say quietly but forcefully.

I'm almost unsure if he heard me, but I can feel the smile behind his mask.

"Hades is going to be home any minute."

He shakes his head, as if he knows.

How would he know?

Hades and Alastor are meeting some guy in the mountains for the evening. Apparently this guy is ex-special forces, and may be able to help find out who the killer is quicker.

The killer, who is standing right in front of me.

"If you even touch me, your entire body is going to be food for the bears once Hades finds out."

I can feel the chuckle from across the yard.

I'm tired of this game, and I blink at him slowly, pretending to act as if I'm giving up, when internally, I'm preparing myself.

I don't glance toward the door, but I know it's opened.

That scares me even more.

With a small swallow, I curl my toes in my boots, my body tensing for a split second before I take off.

I sprint, with everything in me.

I haven't raced this fast since the woods at Carnival de Morte.

I have been afraid for myself many times in my life, but at this moment, when I see Adrianna walk up to the opened door, the fear is amplified more than it ever has been in my entire life.

"Mommy, come on!" she shouts before seeing a man racing toward me. She lets out a scream as the man comes up behind me.

*Oomph.*

I fall to the ground, my hand slamming against the crisp grass moments before my nose slams against the ground.

*Crunch.*

I can feel the break, the oozing of blood. The man presses his entire weight on me, and I know the little fight I have left has to be used correctly.

I glance up, seeing Adrianna looking at me in fear.

My little angel. She's so smart, and so damn brave.

"Tommy Pickles, Adrianna. Tommy Pickles!"

Code word.

Code word.

Adrianna freezes, her little two-year-old self way too smart for her own good.

She closes the door, and it slams so hard I can feel the walls shake. I can hear the lock before I drop my pounding face to the ground, knowing Adrianna will take care of it.

Hades made sure she knew what to do just only last week.

~

*"I'm going to teach her," Hades says out of the blue.*

*I tilt my head to the side, dressed in Hades's sweats and my hair in a messy bun. For once, we're all home and relaxing. It feels good, and my body needed it, because I can barely move off the couch.*

*"Teach who what?" I ask, pulling the throw blanket up to my chin. I roll on my side, my eyes turning back toward* Yellowstone*.*

*Hades sighs, grabbing the remote from under my armpit and flicking the TV off.*

*"I'm going to teach Adrianna what to do if something happens. If something were to happen."*

*I scowl at him. "No, you're not! She's two, Hades. Come on."*

*He grinds his teeth. "She needs to know what to do."*

*I shake my head, a shocked laugh puffing out of me. "No, she doesn't. She's a kid."*

*"All the more reason. It's not safe anywhere, ever. Teaching her these skills now will prepare her for a better future."*

*I blink at him. "A two-year-old, Hades? Really?"*

*"Really." His tone brooks no argument, and I can't believe he's serious. He's literally serious.*

*"Adrianna!"*

*I can hear Adrianna from upstairs shout something back. She's most likely in her playroom.*

*"Come down here for a second!" he shouts to her.*

*I shake my head, groaning as I sit up, too exhausted to deal with any of this today.*

*"Hades…" I groan. "We should talk about this first."*

*He sits back down, squeezing my knee. "There is nothing to talk about, Vivianna. This is for the best. The best for our family."*

*I grind my teeth together as I hear Adrianna’s small feet thumping down the stairs. She turns the corner, still in her pajamas because she’s also having a lazy day, though she has a princess skirt around her waist. Her hair is in tangles as she rushes toward Hades.*

*He prepares himself, his hands reaching out as he lifts her into his arms and settles her on his lap.*

*“There’s something we wanted to talk to you about, Adrianna.”*

*I grind my teeth together.*

*No, there’s something* you *wanted to talk to her about.*

*She tilts her head to the side, curious, but unsure what to say.*

*“You know, sometimes things happen in the world that can make you unsafe. Did you know that?”*

*Her eyes grow wide with fear, and she lets out a small nod. “Like what?”*

*He clears his throat. “Well, sometimes there can be so much snow that it’s like a blizzard, and we’re trapped in our houses. Or, and this would never happen, but a house can start on fire. Down south, like in Florida, they have these things called hurricanes. Do you know what those are?”*

*She shakes her head, amazed and afraid.*

*“It’s when big waves and a storm come and it can cause a lot of flooding and damage to houses.”*

*“Can we have a hurticaine?”*

*I bring my hand to my mouth, stifling my chuckle.*

*Hades doesn’t, letting out a soft laugh as he brushes her messy hair away. “No, we don’t get hurricanes here. But… you know, other things can happen too. You know we have the security system, right? To keep you and your mom safe?”*

*She nods.*

*“It’s because sometimes bad people break into houses and like to take things. And we have a nice house with nice things, so it’s important to me for you and your mom to stay safe. You know that, right?”*

*She nods. “This house safe.”*

*He nods. “Yes, this house is safe. This is our home. But even in our own houses, things can happen. So, that’s why it’s important for us to have a plan.”*

*“Plan?”*

*He smiles at her, so much patience when he has to water down the conversation. “Yes. Because you and your mom mean a lot to me, and I would feel a lot better knowing that if something ever were to happen, you both would know exactly what to do.”*

*Silence. So much silence.*

*“Okay,” Adrianna whispers.*

*Hades spends the next thirty minutes going over every natural disaster we could ever have, different scenarios and a plan for what Adrianna should do in every situation. He makes sure she knows, making her repeat it a few times.*

*I can see the relief in his body as she remembers what to do. I watch as her brain comprehends every word Hades says. She’s a smart girl, probably smarter than a child her age should be.*

*“The last thing I want to talk about is a burglar, or someone breaking into the home. Someone that isn’t supposed to be here coming inside. That would be pretty scary, but I know you’re brave, right? You’re super brave.”*

*She smiles broadly. “I’m brave. I am a princess.” She pats her skirt, twisting her hips from side to side. “Princesses are brave.”*

*Sidetracked. Typical.*

*He smiles, though he’s in serious mode, so he doesn’t think too much into it. “That’s right. You are super brave, Adrianna. But just like everything else, if you do see someone at the house that shouldn’t be there, there are certain things I need you to do, okay? But this is very important, so I need you to pay attention as best you can.”*

*She nods, leaning forward slightly.*

*“If you see someone outside, I need you to lock the door and go to the big panel for the security system and hit the red button. Do you know which one I’m talking about?”*

*She nods.*

*He smiles stiffly. “Perfect. I need you to go and hit that button, and it’s going to contact the police, and also me. Okay?”*

*She nods, a little confused but understanding.*

*But what if someone is inside the house?*

*I reach over, pressing my fingers against Hades’s leg. He looks over to me, and I wiggle my fingers for him to come closer.*

*He narrows his eyes, yet listens, leaning in close.*

*“What?” he whispers.*

*“What if someone is inside?”*

*He leans back without another word.*

*“I already have that covered, butterfly.” Turning toward Adrianna, he covers her shoulder with his hand. “If someone is inside the house, I need you to go into my office, okay? Shut the door, and there’s a lock on the inside, so make sure you lock that, okay?”*

*She nods. “Okay.” Uncertain. Nervous. Though trying to be brave for Hades.*

*She’s too young for this.*

*He grabs her, pulling her close. “Don’t be scared, Adrianna. Nothing is going to happen. It’s just always smart to have safety plans in place. For our family.” He glances over at me. “Right?”*

*I wince. “Right.” He is right, but it feels so wrong.*

*He stares at her for a long moment before leaning forward. “If something were to ever happen with someone trying to get in, or someone already in the house, I want you to say a word.”*

*Her nose scrunches, little wrinkles forming along the bridge. “A word?”*

*He nods slowly. “A code word. If your mom says it, that means you know something is happening. And you can say it, too. But only say it if it’s actually an emergency, okay?”*

*“What’s the word?” I blurt out.*

*He rolls his eyes, glancing around the room before they land on a* Rugrats *book sitting in the corner of the room.*

*“Tommy Pickles.”*

*Tommy fucking Pickles. My God.*

*“Got it?” he confirms with Adrianna.*

*“Tommy Pickles. Got it.” She nods, as if she has the world in the palm of her hand.*

*He grabs onto her chin, gently turning her eyes to his. “I love you, Adrianna. You know that?”*

*She gives him a big smile. “I love you, too.” Wrapping her arms around his torso, she rests her head against his chest.*

*He closes his eyes, wrapping her in his arms a second longer before leaning back. “Good. Now go play before it’s bedtime.”*

*She slides off his lap, walking over to me and giving me a hug too. “I love you, Mommy.”*

*My eyes burn, and I blink back the tears. “I love you so much, baby girl,” I whisper softly.*

*She rushes away without a second thought, her fingers pulling at her princess skirt as she skitters back up the stairs.*

*Once I hear the footsteps far enough away, I whip my head to Hades. “She was too young for that conversation, Hades. Way too young.”*

*He nods. “I know, but it still needed to be had.”*

*“How? How is a conversation about an intruder okay with a kid her age? It felt wrong. So wrong.”*

*Hades sighs, dropping his head into his hands. He scrubs his hands down his face before dragging his fingers through his hair. Reaching next to him, he drops his hat on his head backward, dragging his fingers behind his head and pushing the hair back.*

*Turning to me, he seems more serious than usual.*

*“Vivianna, I need you to understand something, and I need you to seriously understand it, okay?”*

*I frown. “Okay.”*

*“This world isn’t safe. This world isn’t even close to being safe. Even out here, in the mountains, protected by a house from all angles. It isn’t safe. Not here, not anywhere. And living with me? The life I’ve lived? What you’ve been through? Don’t you realize how our lives are? Would you really like Adrianna to grow up being so oblivious to the dangers of the life we live? Of the life I live?”*

*My face scrunches. “She doesn’t understand, Hades.”*

*His jaw clenches. “She understood every word I said.”*

*“But she should be shielded from danger. She’s just a child.”*

*“Shielding kids from the truth makes them oblivious. If something were to happen to her, your shielding of words isn’t going to do anything to protect her. It’s going to make her vulnerable and confused.”*

*I shake my head, understanding where he’s coming from, though still feeling like she is just way too young. “I just don’t think it was the time.”*

*He sighs, exasperated with me. “You can think it wasn’t the right time all you want. Adrianna is also my responsibility, and I’m going to help raise her, and she’s going to understand this world and be strong enough to protect herself.”*

*“A two-year-old?”*

*His nostrils flare. “Obviously not at two, Vivianna. But she’s going to grow up with the tools to know what the world is really like, so when she’s older, if the time comes, I know that girl, my fucking daughter, is going to be safe. Do you understand me?” he clips, brooking no argument.*

*He’s mad. No, he’s livid.*

*I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat. “I understand.”*

*“Good.” He shoves off the couch, not sparing me another glance. “And we’ve got to teach you to protect yourself, too. Learn how to shoot a gun and shit. You’re a shit shot.”*

*“Hey!” I shout at his retreating back.*

*He chuckles, still walking away. “It’s the truth, butterfly. If you’re going to live this life with me, you’re going to know how to survive.”*

~

“Stupid bitch.” A growl behind me snaps me out of my memory, moments before an elbow slams into the back of my head.

Blood pools in my nose and mouth, dripping down my throat. I cough, gagging as the thick warm liquid begins choking me. I want to sob, grateful Hades had that conversation with Adrianna.

Even if something happens to me, I know she will be safe.

“You’re fucking dead.” The animalistic growl sounds so dangerous, deadly as it rings in my ears.

A shiver runs through my body, and it only takes moments before I can hear it.

The alarm.

It's loud, and it makes me fear for Adrianna. I know she's terrified inside, but she did it.

She did it.

The alarm sounds vicious, ringing through the closed door and echoing into the mountains.

The body behind me freezes, firm from the elbow pinning the back of my neck, all the way down his legs, which are pinning mine to the cold grass.

"Fucking shit," he snaps.

*Bang, bang, bang.*

His elbow slams into the back of me repeatedly, each one making me see stars. It feels like forever, but I'm sure it's only moments before he tears himself from my body, his weight disappearing. I can hear him as he rushes away from me, though I can't lift my head.

It hurts.

It all hurts.

I don't know how long I lay like that. My body feels nearly paralyzed as I grow cold, shivering against the ground.

Until lights fall over me, rushing footsteps, and my name called.

Hades. He came.

He always comes.

How long did it take him, though? How long have I been laying here? He wasn't supposed to come home tonight.

I let out a groan, letting him know I'm alive.

I can hear other voices, unfamiliar voices.

I groan again, and the smoky scent of Hades fills my senses as he lifts me up into his arms.

"Sir, you shouldn't—"

"Fuck off," Hades growls, rolling me onto my back. He holds me tightly, and I look up at him, blood caked against my face, my entire being throbbing in absolute agony.

I don't know how to breathe, or talk, so all I do is sigh, rolling into him and closing my eyes.

"Where is Adrianna?" he asks.

"She's in here, sir!" Another unknown voice.

"Fucking hell." This comes from Alastor. I want to cry for my brother.

"Adrianna, unlock the door!" Alastor shouts, anger rippling through his voice.

I can hear the door opened, followed by Adrianna's loud cry.

So many footsteps, so many voices.

I do cry.

I finally let it loose.

"What the fuck happened?" Alastor barks, and then he murmurs softly, most likely to Adrianna.

Adrianna hiccups, and I do my best to crack my eyes open. I can see a glimpse of Adrianna curled into Alastor.

"The bad man came," Adrianna hiccups, holding on to Alastor. For dear life.

My body shudders as I fall back into Hades.

Hades's arms tighten around me. "He came here?" he asks quietly.

I nod my head and wince. Ouch, that hurts.

I can feel the growl in Hades's chest before I hear it, rolling through the night air.

"Sir, we need to ask the lady a few questions," a man from behind me says cautiously.

Hades moves, and I'm not sure exactly where we're going until I can feel the heat of our home. "You won't be asking her any questions tonight. We have it covered."

"Sir, it's protocol…"

"Officer, I'm going to ask you nicely to leave. Thank you for coming to check things out, but I can assure you, we'll have it covered from here." This comes from Alastor, and he doesn't sound happy. Not at all.

There's silence, and some mumbling and clearing of throats.

"Call us if you need anything," one of them says before footsteps retreat, and the door slides shut.

Click.

Locked.

I sigh in relief, wanting to cry, but not wanting to experience the pain.

"You're freezing, Vivianna," Hades growls.

"I hurt," I croak.

"Dude, she needs a hospital. Look at her, her nose is broken." Alastor groans as he walks up to me. I can feel a fingertip on my elbow, and it's so warm against my cool skin. "You need something, sis? What can I do?"

"Take care of Adrianna, Al. I'm going to run Vivianna a bath and get her cleaned up.”

Alastor sighs. "All right. Let's get you cleaned up, huh, Adri?"

"Is Mommy okay?" Adrianna sniffles.

"Wait," I groan, turning my head slightly. "Come here, Adrianna."

Alastor walks toward me with Adrianna clutched around him like a monkey.

I can't move to touch her, or kiss her, as I desperately want to, but I do let out a small smile, even though I'm certain I look like a monster. "I'm so proud of you, baby. You did exactly what you were supposed to do."

She frowns. "But you hurt." Tears floor her eyes, and my heart cracks in half. I wanted to protect her from this. From all of it.

I shake my head, ignoring the lashing pain in my skull. "I'm fine, just a little dirty. The important thing to me is that you're safe. You did exactly what Hades said, and you did it so well. I'm proud of you."

She nods, still unsure of what happened, but taking my word for it.

Hades clears his throat. "Good job, Adrianna. I knew you would be so brave, just like I said. Try and get some rest, watch a movie with Uncle Al, and tomorrow will be such a better day."

She nods, and I can see the bags of exhaustion under her eyes.

What went from her first snowfall to her first home invasion in a matter of minutes.

I want to shield her, but she's already experienced so much.

We need this to end, so we can finally be safe… and happy.

Hades turns, walking me toward the stairs. Each step gives a little thump into my neck and the back of my skull. I close my eyes as he makes his way to the second level and straight into our room.

"I'm going to put you down on the bed for just a second. I need you to not fall asleep, okay?"

I groan.

"I'm serious, Vivianna. Don't fall asleep, no matter how good you think it’ll feel. It won’t, okay?”

“Okay.” I frown, wanting to sob, but knowing he’s probably right.

If the pain in my head says anything, I most likely have a concussion.

The moment he walks to our en-suite bathroom, I do close my eyes, listening as the tub turns on. I can hear Hades bang around in the bathroom for a few minutes, the sound somehow soothing as my body melts into the mattress.

This feels good.

Sleep does attempt to take me, and I do everything in my power to stay awake. It's pulling me under when the tub turns off, snapping me out of my daze.

Hades's quick footsteps make their way across the room until I can feel the heat from his body beside me.

"Butterfly?"

"I'm awake," I sigh. "Barely."

He makes a noise in the back of his throat, something between agony and regret. His warm hands curl beneath my body, and he lifts me into his arms again as gently as possible.

"Let's get you warmed up and clean. And I want to know everything."

I nod my head, knowing the interrogation was going to happen.

He makes his way into the bathroom, and instantly dims the lights when we step inside.

"I'm going to need you to stand on your feet for a minute. Okay?"

"I don't know if I can," I whimper.

"I'll hold you up, I just need you upright for a second."

I nod.

He shifts me around, and I let out a groan as pain rolls through each inch of my body. As gently as possible, Hades removes my cold, wet clothing. My shirt, which feels as if it's caked in blood, will need to get thrown away altogether.

Once I'm naked, I can hear Hades hiss out a breath.

I lift my head, though my eyes are barely opened. "What?"

He shifts his eyes to the bathtub. "Nothing, come on."

"I look that bad?" I wince, my voice cracking every other letter.

He shakes his head, not even choosing to respond.

Leaning into him for support, he grabs me around the waist and helps me into the warm water. I can smell a hint of lavender permeating the air, and I groan as he helps me down. I sink in, all the way to my neck, until only my head is above the water.

Hades squats down beside me, lifting a black towel and dipping it into the water.

"What happened, Vivianna?"

I wince, so sad about what keeps happening. So incredibly sad, because I hate victimizing myself, but for some reason, things like this continuously happen to me.

I shut my eyes, a tear slipping over the edge and down my cheek. It's followed by another, and another. Continuous tears, and I'm almost worried the bathtub is going to overflow.

Glancing down, I see my tears tinged in pink.

So much blood.

I take a deep breath from my mouth, my nose completely clogged, swollen, throbbing in pain.

Hades lifts the washcloth to my face. "Butterfly," he commands softly.

I rest my head against the back of the tub before letting out a cry, snapping my head up.

That hurt.

His face contorts in pain as he shakes his head, reaching behind him and grabbing a towel. He rolls it up, pressing it against the back of the tub and gesturing with his head for me to lean back. I do, tilting my head to the side to look at him.

"I don't know how it happened, or what even totally happened. It just was all so incredibly fast."

"What were you doing?" he asks softly, continuing his work of cleaning the blood off my face and neck.

I close my eyes briefly, thinking back on every detail, every word that was said.

Opening my eyes, I can feel exhaustion heavy with each blink. “I was playing in the backyard with Adrianna. She was really excited because it was snowing for the first time, and she's never seen snow before. It was starting to get dark and I was telling her to go inside and we'd make some hot chocolate. She rushed inside and I was going after her and…"

Pain blows through my head, and I whimper, bringing my hand up to the front of my forehead.

"Don't rush it, Vivianna. Just relax."

I take a deep breath, dropping my hand back into the water with a plop. "I heard a noise, and at first I didn't know if it was an animal or a person. I just stood there for a second and when I didn't hear anything else, I kept walking. But then it's like he appeared out of nowhere. He was just there, and it all happened so fast. I was on my stomach, and Adrianna was screaming at the top of her lungs, and I told her the code word, and she—" I choke out a sob, the pain in my body not as excruciating as the pain in my heart.

She was so terrified.

"She what?" he snaps.

I look over at him with watery eyes. "She closed the door and locked it. She listened to every word you said that night, Hades. She was so damn brave, and…" I swallow down another sob. "I don't remember much after that. Whoever it was just kept hitting me. Growling at me. He felt so angry. There was so much hate in the energy behind me. It was terrifying, Hades. Nothing like Borris, nothing at all. This was just pure… rage."

Hades pauses with the rag, dripping watery blood into the tub. He shakes his head. "Did you hear his voice? Did it sound familiar at all?"

I barely manage to shake my head. "No, it was too hard. I was too scared, and it wasn’t distinct enough where I could pick it out or remember it. Whoever it was, though, he just absolutely hates me, Hades. Hates me so much."

He looks so angry as he stares at the wall behind me. Nothing but rage in his eyes.

He blinks a few times, snapping out of his rage as he turns to me, dropping the rag into the tub. His wet fingers go to my face, and he brushes across my cheekbone that I can tell is swelling from my nose.

"Your nose is busted. You most definitely have a concussion. And… lean up for a second."

I frown as he grabs onto my shoulder lightly and helps me sit up. He lets out a feral snarl, and I turn my head as much as I can. "What is it?"

"It's like he tried to… paralyze you or something. What was he hitting you with? Directly in your fucking spine, Vivianna…"

I sniffle. "I don't know. It kind of felt like his elbow or something. Just pounding into me… over and over again."

His fingers twitch against my shoulder before releasing me and helping me back against the tub. I relax my limbs as best I can, looking up at him. "What are you thinking?" I whisper.

He lets out a chuckle, though there is absolutely no humor in it. "I'm thinking of all the ways I'm going to torture this guy once I find him." He shakes his head in disgust. "What he did to you," he growls, shoving off the ground and pacing across the bathroom. "He had the balls to come here. What if I had been there?"

A memory rings in my brain. "He knew you weren't going to be here tonight."

He pauses, freezes, turns to stone in front of me. "What did he say?"

“He didn’t even say anything, but I did say you were going to be home soon, and he shook he head. He knew, Hades. He knew you weren’t near, and that’s why he came tonight.”

His jaw clenches. Ticking continuously as he stares at me in fury. He isn't angry with me, though. I can feel that. He's angry at the situation. He's mad that I'm once again set into harm’s way and he allowed me to get hurt.

He's angry that he believes this man, this killer, is one step ahead of him.

"You and Adrianna, you aren't to leave the house until we figure this out. If you leave, you're leaving with me or one of the guys. Otherwise, you both stay here. Inside."

I blink at him. "So, you're telling me I can't even go outside in our own yard?"

He looks at me. "Look at what happened to you from going to the yard. You'll be safe inside. The only ones who know the code is me and the guys. You'll be safe inside with Adrianna. We were so close tonight… so close."

I frown at him. "What do you mean, so close?"

He walks over to the tub, crouching down and dipping his hand into the water, cupping a small amount and pouring it over my naked chest. He's gentle with me, warming my body with the water and ridding and remnants of crimson blood.

"The man Alastor and I met with today, he was going over the entire Carnival de Morte list. This guy is a genius, previous special forces. He's dealt with ISIS, Osama bin Laden, even the nine-eleven terrorist attacks. He knows his shit, and it took him about five seconds to start narrowing it down faster than we ever have been able to. This guy is going to help us figure it out. I can feel it, we're so close. We might have even figured it out if this motherfucker didn't decide to be ballsy tonight and come here."

I frown. "I'm sorry."

He blinks at me. "Sorry for what?"

"That you had to come here and rescue me, once again. I feel like that's all you do in life. Just continue to rescue my damsel-in-distress ass over and over again.”

He shakes his head, agitated with my words. “You aren’t a fucking damsel in distress, Vivianna. It’s my job to protect you. Here is where I wanted to be, okay? It’s always with you.”

I sink deeper into the tub, my heart thumping, aching against my sore chest.

“I love you, Hades.”

He leans forward, pressing his lips gently against my forehead. “I love you too, Vivianna. We’re going to figure this out. You just need to stay safe, inside, until we do, okay? No more risking you, or Adrianna.”

That, I can agree with.

“Okay.”

# Chapter Sixteen

## Hades

H

ey,” Alastor says a few days later as I pull up to his house. He looks exhausted. We all are, honestly.

“Hey,” I murmur around a cigarette. Exhaling smoke through my nose, I shift my truck into drive. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah. The girls okay?” he asks with a frown as he slips into the passenger seat.

I nod. It took about two days for Adrianna to snap back to normal. She was pretty shook up from the other night. Vivianna is strong as hell, as always. Her face is already healing, though her nose will never be the same. It's not horrible, but she'll have a bump forever, and it'll be slightly crooked. Once I thought it safe for her to fall asleep, the only way she could fall asleep was on her side.

The back of her skull, her spine, her entire back, is one massive bruise. She took one hell of a beating, and she's either got a high pain tolerance, or she's putting on a brave face for Adrianna. Either way, as the hours went on, she slowly started healing. She's got a little while to go, but she'll be okay.

And once Adrianna knew that, she started to come around, as well.

The girls have been relaxing for the last few days, and since it's been so uneventful, Alastor and I decide it was time to head back to the mountains and visit the detective.

It's time to find out who is behind all this.

I, and everyone else, is ready for this to be over.

The rest of the guys are exhausted as well, and they've been traveling the country to visit old Carnival de Morte members.

Surprisingly, it's been a while since there has been a murder. The news reporters seem to think it's wild, though we know the real reason.

He has his next target, he just hasn't gotten to her yet.

He's not going to—we just have to beat him to it.

"The girls are good. I think they're planning another lazy day. Brennan talked about picking up ice cream for them or something."

Alastor smiles, pulling out a small joint and tapping it against his thigh before he sparks it up. "I'm ready for this shit to be over."

I shake my head, ashing my cigarette out the window. "Who isn't?"

Alastor leans back, adjusting himself and getting comfortable. "Well, hopefully after today, we can finally know who it is and come up with a plan to take him out."

"I've already got a few ideas," I grumble, turning onto the freeway and making my way into the mountains. It's going to be about an hour-long drive, but he's expecting us, and hopefully he's been doing a little work himself while we've been gone.

"Once this is all done, I think I'm going to take a vacation. Somewhere tropical where I can sit in the sand and get drunk for like a week straight."

I smile. That totally sounds like Al.

My best friend. For years. We've both changed so much, yet we're still exactly the same. Even after the time we spent apart, we're still thick as thieves, and he'll forever be my brother.

Glancing over at him, he catches my eye, looking at me for a second before chuckling. "What?"

I turn my gaze back to the window. "I'm glad you're here, Alastor, and I'm glad you're off the hard shit. You seem good. I know you're good."

He lets out a deep breath, running his hands down his chest. "I am good. I'm glad to be past that life. It took a lot out of me, but I'm glad to be here. For you, Viv, and Adrianna. I couldn't imagine my life any other way at this point."

"Your parents would be proud of you, you know. For stepping up."

He scowls a bit, shaking his head. "I don't know if I'd use the word proud."

I nod. "I would. I knew them for years, Alastor. They would be proud of you. Just because you fell, doesn't mean you didn't stand back up. Sometimes it just takes some time, and I think they'd be really proud of the man you've turned out to be. I know I am."

He turns to look out the window, and I can see from the corner of my eye as his jaw clenches. "Thanks, man." His voice is off, a little stiff.

He clears his throat, leaning forward and switching on the radio. “Enough of this shit. Let’s just drive.”

I smile, nod, and just drive.

~

“You know, I sometimes wonder about people like this. Ex-military type. Live in the middle of the woods in a run-down wooden shack that looks like it would blow down with a sneeze. Is this guy even sane?” Alastor mumbles as I turn off the car.

I glance up at the house, admiring the disarray of it all.

It is a piece of shit. That’s obvious. The wood is rotted in places and looks loose in others. Perhaps it would just fall over in a bad windstorm.

Is this guy sane? Probably not. Would you be after you deal with terrorists and brutal deaths for half your life? This guy has seen more death than most, has dealt with the worst of the worst.

I’d kind of be worried if he didn’t have a screw loose.

"I don't know, I kind of like it. Away from the world, not bothered by anyone. It's like this guy found his own peace away from the chaos of the world."

"If you consider this peace," he grumbles, opening his door and stepping out of the car.

I shake my head, following behind him.

The moment our car doors shut, the man in discussion opens the door, wearing a battered robe, his dark hair slicked away from his face. I can't make out his facial expressions behind his thick, long beard, but his eyes are at least welcoming.

I use that as my sign to step forward.

"How's it going, Eric?" I ask, stepping up the loose steps leading to the porch.

"Another day," he says, barely paying attention as he glances into the distance. "Did you see anyone follow you on your way up here?"

I shake my head. That's something I'm always on the lookout for. "No, we've been alone for hours."

He relaxes, just a fraction. "Good, come on in."

I can hear Alastor sigh behind me, and I wave him off as I step inside, instantly smelling smoke and coffee.

The place is organized chaos. Newspapers and articles in various stacks on the floor, pushed up against the wall.

No art, no personal belongings exist. It's all work.

Terrorism, serial killers, conspiracies. Anything that you can think of, it's here.

The most organized place is his desk area, which barely has a speck of dust on it, but instead about four monitors, two of them with about sixteen cameras showing different sections of his property. The other two are black.

There's a black manila folder sitting on the center of his desk, and he goes to sit down in his expensive leather chair, sliding the folder onto his lap.

"What's the update? I haven't heard from you guys since you busted out of here the other night."

"Did you figure out who it is?" I ask.

He tilts his head to the side. "What happened?"

"Whoever it was attacked Vivianna. In their backyard. She was pretty shook up, and so was her daughter."

The man gives a simple nod, completely emotionless, as someone would be who has lost every bit of empathy. "I see," he murmurs.

"So, do you know who it is or don't you?"

He spreads his fingers across the top of the folder. "I do."

I blink, and blink again. "Who is it?"

He tenses slightly before spinning his chair around to his desk. He leaves the folder tucked beneath his desk on his lap as he powers on the other two screens on his desk.

"It was quite simple, actually. A process of elimination of criminals, everyone's background checks, their history, names, addresses, you know, etcetera, etcetera. I could have basically figured it out in my sleep, but I do realize why you couldn't figure it out."

I look toward Alastor in confusion before looking back at Eric. "Why?"

He flicks his mouse and goes to some document, pulling it up.

I step closer to his computer, seeing some compilation of everyone from Carnival de Morte. What has taken us days, weeks, to come up with even a fraction of this, this man came up with in a matter of hours. "Holy shit."

He scrolls through, and I see Borris at the top, names I know, and some I've never seen before.

"How did you get all this information?" Alastor asks in shock.

The man frowns at him, like he's insulted he was even asked that question. "Don't be stupid, kid. And don't ask questions like that."

Alastor's jaw clenches as he crosses his arms over his chest. "Okay, well, are you going to tell us who it is?"

The man nods, looking up at us in shock.

"You never would have guessed."

# Chapter Seventeen

## Vivianna

M

ommy," Adrianna whispers from beside me. She's tucked under my arm, blankets surrounding us on the couch with *SpongeBob SquarePants* playing on the TV.

"What?" I whisper, my eyelids heavy. I could take a nap and not wake up for days. It feels good to finally just relax for a while.

I hate being on lockdown, but I'm also going to be honest and say it isn't the worst thing in the entire world.

"Do you think I can ask Uncle Brennan to get me some ice cream now?" she whispers, glancing over at Brennan, who sits on the opposite end of the couch, scrolling through his phone.

He glances up at her words, giving her a small smile. "I heard that, little monster. You're ready for some ice cream?"

She nods, vibrating with excitement in my arms.

He chuckles, pocketing his phone. “Okay, so what flavor do you want? I can run there quick and pick you up a scoop… or two.” He smiles at me.

I shake my head, knowing the sugar is going to keep her up all night.

She shoves off me, and I wince slightly from the fading bruises.

“Strawberry, no… mint! Or maybe chocolate?” She taps her chin with her pointer finger. “Or cookie ice cream!”

He laughs. “Adri, you’re going to have to pick one.” He looks at me. “Unless you want a scoop of each?” He smiles widely at me.

My eyes widen. “No, absolutely not.” I turn to Adrianna. “Adri, just pick a flavor, baby. You can always get a different one next time.”

Her head sways back and forth, so indecisive. “Ummmm…”

“Why don’t you just go with him and pick a flavor? That way you can look at it and decide.”

Brennan frowns. “I don’t know, Villain.”

I wave him off. “It’s fine. It’s like two miles away, she’ll be safe with you, and I’ll be locked in the dungeon. Just go, hurry back, and no one will ever know.”

He looks up at the camera. “If you don’t think Hades looks at every second of that camera footage, you’re not thinking clearly.”

No, I’m most certainly certain he does.

“I’ll deal with him. Just go!”

“Let’s go, Uncle Brennan! I want to go look at all the flavors!” She jumps off the couch in her pajamas, and I realize whether Hades yells at me or not, she needs this.

She needs to get out of the house, even if it’s for only a second.

He stares at me a moment, not at all pleased, but he doesn’t want to fight.

“Fine. Little monster, go get your shoes on. Let’s hurry up and get back.”

“Yay!” she shrieks, rushing toward the front door.

Brennan points at me. “I’d usually take the heat, but I’m totally going to blame you for this one.”

I nod. “Fine with me, Brennan. Have fun, and only one flavor, please! Oh, and I’ll take a mint.”

He shakes his head, exasperated with me as he heads to the front door.

Moments later, I can hear the system disarm before the front door opens and shuts, the system once again arming.

All the guys have the system on their phone.

A little overprotective I think, but not a fight I want to battle.

I slink back onto the couch, closing my eyes and ready to take a quick nap when my bladder screams.

Time to pee.

I whip the blanket off my legs and shove off the couch with a groan, making my way to the bathroom.

As I’m washing my hands, I can hear the faint beep of the alarm disarming. My brow furrows as I wipe my hands on my pants and head toward the front door, my first thought is thinking something is wrong with Adrianna.

“You guys are back already?” I ask, surprised, only to stop, my entire body turning to stone.

The man in black stands in front of the alarm system. He doesn’t even turn to me as he presses a button, arming the system.

*Shit. Shit.*

I back up a step, and only then does he turn his head, tilting it slightly.

I swear I can feel the smile beneath the mask.

“How do you know the code?” I ask calmly.

He stands up to his full height, about six feet tall, and I feel as if I’m shrinking, turning into an ant in front of him.

“How do you know the code to my alarm system?” I ask again, sounding firmer, surer of myself, even though my insides are quivering in fear.

I’ve barely survived the last attack, my body still healing from the assault. I definitely don’t think I’ll survive another one.

He doesn’t answer me, and it puts me on edge.

Why doesn’t he say anything?

“Get out of my house,” I growl.

He’s been watching me.

He comes at the exact moment Brennan leaves. He knew this was the perfect time to come. He knew Hades was gone again.

I swallow, petrified of what’s going to happen.

I shuffle back a second, wishing I had any kind of weapon on me, but I’m in sweats with no underwear underneath, such a couch potato today, I barely feel awake.

I want to scream, but I know that isn’t going to accomplish anything, except maybe a set of knuckles into my jawline.

My only option is to either escape and hide until Brennan gets back, or get a weapon and fight back.

What to do. *What to do.*

Ah, shit.

I need to fight back. Hades warned me there would come a day, and though I haven't had a chance to learn a thing, I think it's time for me to fight back.

Without even thinking a second, I spin on my feet, racing toward the kitchen.

I can hear him behind me, his strides quick, as if he knows exactly where to go, which steps to take.

It causes shivers to rack my spine. Who is this man?

I make it to the kitchen, spinning around the side of the island.

He stands on the other.

I breathe, looking at the man who I can't see at all, though he can see every inch of me.

"Get out of my house," I snap.

He bobs his head back and forth, not saying a word.

He's toying with me. Playing a game.

I'm not playing.

I open the drawer in front of me the same moment he moves toward me—fast. He rushes me, and I pull out a knife, swinging it in front of me.

"Don't come any closer."

I can hear his chuckle, deep, raspy.

"I'm not playing around. Get the fuck out of here before I bleed you out on my new floors."

He steps closer, unafraid of my threats.

I swing the knife out, and he shuffles back with ease before coming back again.

I swing again.

It cuts through his black sweatshirt, exposing a slice of tanned skin.

A male.

A younger male.

I narrow my eyes, wondering who it could possibly be.

The one moment of distraction is enough for him. He lunges forward, batting the knife out of my hand. It flies to the floor with a clank, and I let out a shriek as I back up. He's fast, though, as before. He swoops me into his arms. I let out a scream, punching, kicking, and scratching at any part of him I can reach. He's completely covered and protected, and all I do is hit fabric.

I feel useless, and I'm off my game with the pain my body still throbs with.

He's unconcerned as he spins around and walks with ease through my house. He knows the layout, and he knows exactly where he wants to go.

Toward the stairs.

“No. No!” I refuse. There is nothing good that would come from going upstairs. I will not, cannot deal with this again.

He ignores me completely as he makes his way up the stairs, walking smoothly, lazily around the corner and into the master bedroom.

I let out a cry as he moves toward the bed, fighting with every ounce of strength I have in my body. I can feel the pressure in my skull as I push against his shoulders, my neck and face turning red from the force.

It does no good, though. It's as if this man is made of complete stone.

"Please don't do this. Don't do this. You have to think about it for a second. I don't know who you are, but you have to at least have somewhat of an indication who Hades is, right? Hades Gray. He will not—*will not*—let you survive this. Do you understand? Is that the fate you want? It'll be painful. Don't do that to me, or yourself."

"I don't give a shit about Hades Gray."

The growly voice sounds almost familiar, but in my panic, it doesn't register.

He moves to the bed, stopping at the foot of it. I can feel his hand as he digs into his back pocket and grabs a tightly wrapped piece of cordage.

No.

Fuck no.

"No!" This time I do scream. I scream at the top of my lungs.

*Crack*.

Knuckles against my cheekbone, just as I expected. It reactivates the throbbing in my skull, and I let out a cry as my head lolls to the side, though the fight is still in me as I kick and thrash against him.

He drops me to the ground.

I scramble away, but he's quick to fall on top of me, pinning me to the ground.

"Please! Get off me!" I cry.

He flips me onto my stomach, confident in his moves. I glance at him over my shoulder, cheek fiercely pulsing in pain as I stare at him with watery eyes. He unravels the cordage, and with quick movements, wraps them around my wrists and ankles.

He hog-ties me.

I roll back and forth as he gets to his feet, glancing down at me, and I wonder if he appreciates his work or is looking at me in disgust.

I detest whoever this man is that stands before me.

Pleased with what he's done, he seems to brush his gloved hands against the thighs of his pants before reaching into his other pocket and pulling out a much thicker, tanned rope.

I hate him. *I hate him.*

He moves to the light fixture in the center of the room, swinging the rope over and creating some kind of a binding system.

I blink at him, tears flooding my eyes.

Please, no.

He drops the rope, and it hangs, swaying from the light fixture. Turning toward me, he reaches behind him and pulls out a knife.

I shake my head, whipping it back and forth as I attempt to get away. It's impossible in this position, though, and I end up scooting closer.

He lets out a sigh, bending over with his knife extended. I squint, ready for the knife to sink into my skin, but it's almost worse.

He cuts my clothes off.

I begin sobbing, crying as I lay there naked at his feet.

I don't want this. I don't want this at all.

"Please, stop," I garble, my words barely coherent at this point.

He ignores me, cutting the ties from my back and grabbing onto my bicep, lifting me to a stand. He’s rough with me, uncaring as he pulls me across the room and to the hanging rope.

“No!” I dig my heels into the carpet, but all it does is burn the bottoms of my feet as he continues to pull me toward the center of the room. “Please. Please!” I scream.

He ignores me, lifting my arms above my head and grabbing onto the rough rope, wrapping it around my wrists. They’re suspended above my head, my arms pulled so tightly my shoulders begin to ache.

I’m completely on display for him as he stands before me, this mysterious man who wants me dead before him.

“Who are you?” I cry. “Please, I’ll do anything. Just don’t… don’t hurt me, please.”

He laughs. “Hurt is all I want to do to you, Vivianna.”

I blink away my tears, trying to figure out where I’ve heard that voice before.

He extends his knife, dragging it along my skin, from my rib cage and down to my hip bone.

He turns the knife quickly, and it nicks my skin. I wince, moving away from it, but it’s too late. I can feel the warm dollop of blood as it rolls down my skin.

“Hurt is minor for what you’re about to endure.”

Reaching up, he grabs the back of his mask, pulling it over his head.

My eyes widen, my jaw slackening in shock. I can’t believe my eyes as I stare at the man in front of me.

“I’m going to bleed you dry and let your precious Hades Gray weep over your dead body in your beautiful home. But first, I’m going to make you scream in pain.”

He steps toward me, and I do exactly as he predicted.

I open my mouth, and I scream.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Hades

T

ell me who it is, Eric. I can’t sit around and wait anymore. This is time sensitive.”

He lifts his eyes to me, opening up the folder. “Yes, it certainly is time sensitive.” Spreading the papers out in front of him, he lets out a sigh as he looks up at me. “It was quite simple. First, I went through the members of Carnival de Morte. Not the staff, but the members. Well, most of them are rich dicks with too much money to know what to do with. Elite shits that are too wrapped up in their own lives to probably even realize there is a murderer on the loose. So, that eliminated half of them. Then I moved on to the staff. That was a little more difficult. Some people disappeared from their own lives and showed up at Carnival de Morte. Some of them felons, others just lonely fucks who had nothing left to live for.”

I sigh, wondering what the point is for all of this. “And who did you find is the killer?” My patience is thinning.

He glances up at me with his own irritation. “Let me go through my process and you’ll find out soon.”

I clench my hands into fists. “Go on.”

He flips the pages and goes to another. “It’s interesting, actually, what Borris had created. A world for those who didn’t want to be a part of the real world. Some underground society that existed in broad daylight. He was quite clever, even if he was an idiot.”

Alastor shifts beside me, and I know his impatience is also growing thin.

“Well, that part took a while, but there was one individual that I got stuck on, and upon further digging, I was able to connect a relation to someone.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Borris.” He doesn’t look up at me when he says this, rather focused on thumbing through his papers. “There is someone at Carnival de Morte who is related to Borris—” He grabs a piece of paper before extending it to me. “—who is also close to you.”

“Me?” I snap.

He waves the piece of paper at me. “See for yourself.”

I rip the piece of paper from his hand, feeling Alastor shift so he can read it over my shoulder.

At the top of the paper is a name I never thought I’d see.

“No fucking way,” Alastor whispers.

I read through the findings, my brow furrowed, my blood boiling. The edges of the paper crinkle in my fingers as they tense without my knowledge.

I’m ready to explode.

I look up at Eric, and I feel as if I’m experiencing some out-of-body experience. “Are you telling me that Liam is Borris’s son?”

He nods. “Precisely.”

Alastor chuckles. “You have it wrong. You have to. Liam is part of us.”

Eric tilts his head to the side. “My findings are never incorrect. I’m sorry if the news upsets you, but as is the news of the world.” He spins in his chair, giving us his back. “One of your best friends is the son of the killer and ringleader of Carnival de Morte. I’d say he played the ‘keep your friends close and your enemies closer’ mantra. And if I were you, I would eliminate the threat before he eliminates you.”

I glance over at Alastor. “He’s watching the girls today.”

Alastor’s eyes widen, and he doesn’t even hesitate as he spins on his feet and races toward the door. I mumble a quick thanks to Eric and follow after Alastor. He’s already paid for, and he’s given me everything I needed from him.

I rush out the door, going to pull out my phone just as it starts ringing.

Brennan.

I jump into my truck, turning it on and setting the phone on speaker.

“Brennan.”

“Someone’s in the house,” he mumbles under his breath, panicked. “Someone’s in the house with Vivianna, and I can hear her fucking screaming, dude. Bad.”

My blood runs cold, and I gasp in a breath as Alastor lets out a string of curses beside me.

“I don’t want to go in there because Adrianna is with me, and I don’t want to leave her alone, and I don’t know what I’m going to walk into.”

My brows scrunch together. “Why are you with Adrianna and why is Vivianna alone?”

He chokes out a groan. “I went to get ice cream with Adrianna.”

“Brennan!” I shout at the top of my lungs.

“Hades! It doesn’t matter! Something is happening to Viv!” Alastor leans forward, terror on his face. “Get the fuck in there, Brennan. Get in there now!”

“What do I do with Adri?” He sounds like he’s about to cry. Shit.

“Send her into my office. She knows what to do. Keep him alive. We’re on our way.”

I can feel the panic settle through the phone. “Okay,” Brennan says.

I’m about to hang up when I remember. “Oh, Brennan? It’s fucking Liam.”

“What?!” he shouts.

“Keep him alive. We’ll be there soon.”

I hang up the phone, reversing out of the gravel driveway and flying down the road. I’ll cut my time in half with how fast I speed, and evade every traffic law if I have to.

I need to get to my butterfly.

I need to finish this.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Vivianna

I

choke out a breath as another lash of the blade hits my skin. It’s not deep, but enough to draw blood. Enough to cause pain.

He’s playing games.

He’s drawing it out.

This could go on for years if keeps going like this.

*Please don’t let this go on forever.*

“You think you’re the queen of the world, don’t you? Waltz right in, take Hades’s attention, steal the boys’ hearts as well, you know? They all love you. Everyone just loves little Vivianna Finch, the eternal fucking villain.”

Liam.

I never imagined it would be Liam behind the mask, but it is.

The true villain.

And the look he gives me is one he’s never given me before. To say I’m shocked is an understatement. He was my friend, someone who I thought I could trust.

I never could, and I did.

“And then you go and steal Borris’s heart as well. Well, what he had left of it. He wanted a piece of you more than he ever wanted any other slut that walked through Carnival de Morte. He just couldn’t help himself. I kept telling him to leave you be, but no, dear old Father just couldn’t help himself when it came to the pure little butterfly who flew straight into hell.”

My eyes widen into saucers.

Father?

I gasp in a breath, my aching limbs shaking with fear. “Borris… is your father?” I choke.

He smiles, and dread settles into my soul when I see the same smile as the man who pinned me to the ground and sank deep inside where he never belonged.

Leaning over, I choke, emptying every last drop of fluid from my stomach. It splashes against my feet, and I let out a groan, disgust and horror rolling through me.

“Oh, God.”

I’ve been surrounded by the son of the man who defiled me, and I didn’t even know it.

My stomach rolls again, but there’s nothing left beside a burning acid which tears me from the inside.

“Borris was my father, a long time ago. The carnival took him from me, and I became just another moneymaker to him. It didn’t matter, though, because his blood is my blood, and evil creates evil, right?” Another swipe, this one right across my nipple.

“Please… don’t…” I can’t even say the words, and my head drops between my shoulder blades. The last thing I want is to be used in such a horrifying manner again. Liam knew how much it destroyed me. He was there… to console me. He comforted me during the worst time in my life, and he was just as evil all along?

“What, rape you?” He barks out a laugh. “Please, Hades destroyed that a long time ago. Not only that, I don’t touch what my father touches. Though…” He steps forward, his blade catching a drop of blood slipping from the side of my breast. “You do look like you’d be a lot of fun held against your will.”

I tilt my head toward the ceiling, tears streaming down my temples as I let out the most brutal, gut-wrenching scream.

“No one can hear you, Villain. And if they could, they won’t get to you before your intestines reach the floor.”

I shiver, though sweat tracks down my skin. “P-p-please.” My teeth chatter. I’m starting to grow cold from the blood loss. It’s too much, and I don’t know how much longer I can take.

He laughs at me, maniacal and demented. “P-p-please, what, Villain? Give pity to you? Save you?” He steps toward me, the tip of his knife dripping with my blood. “Instead of saving you, I’d rather watch you not be saved. For once, I want to watch you suffer and have no one come and save you.”

A painful cry rips through my throat, and I finally give in. My body sinks, the tops of my feet dragging on the ground as I allow the weight to pull against my wrists. My shoulders pull as he swipes the blade against my skin.

Against my face.

From the top of my forehead, diagonal across my nose, and to the tip of my lip. My skin burns painfully, but I can’t find any strength left in me to cry any more. I just stand there, my eyes closed, as I feel the warm blood trail down my face.

*Bang.*

A gunshot goes off, and I don’t even lift my head, can’t even find the willpower to open my eyes as I hear a commotion around me.

After what feels like hours, I raise my head, a painful zing shooting through the back of my neck as I peel my eyes opened, seeing Brennan pinning Liam against the wall, blood trailing down his nose, his left eye swollen shut as his chest heaves.

He looks straight at me, both ashamed and horrified at what he sees.

“Vivianna,” he rasps.

Liam jerks against him, and Brennan uses all his strength to shove him against the wall.

“We’re staying just like this until Hades gets here,” Brennan growls.

Liam laughs, sounding pained. “I have no desire to see him. You might as well just end it for him.”

Brennan growls. “I’d much rather watch him do it. You aren’t mine to kill.”

“Yet you’re going to anyway.”

Brennan makes a pleased noise in the back of his throat. “Most likely.”

It’s silence for a few moments until Liam starts cackling. It raises the hair on my arms, and the soles of my feet press against the floor. I start backing up, but my restrained hands don’t allow me to get more than a step or two.

“What the fuck is so damn funny?” Brennan laughs.

Liam doesn’t say a word, only continuing to laugh like a madman, his mouth wide open and his teeth stained pink.

Brennan swings his fist out, slamming his knuckles straight into Liam’s jaw. “What the fuck, Liam?”

“It’s just,” he clears his throat, calming down his laughter. “I still won. At the end of the day, I won.”

Brennan cocks his head to the side. “And how is that?”

Liam’s eyes connect straight with mine, and I flinch, not wanting to see the eyes that I suddenly realize look so much like Borris’s.

“Because, knowing my life is going to end soon, I can die knowing little Villain in front of us will bear mine and my father’s scars for the rest of her life. She’s scarred. Internally. Externally. And I’ve traumatized her more than she realizes. She’ll never be able to trust anyone fully ever again. I’ve damaged her, and even if she doesn’t die today, her life will be a long, torturous one filled with pain and doubt.”

Silent tears track down my cheeks, and I fear he’s exactly right in his assessment.

Brennan hits him. Once, twice, three times. “Shut your fucking mouth, Liam.”

“He’s right,” I murmur, though I don’t think anyone hears me.

“I am right, Villain. And there will come a day when you will wish I would have killed you today. And when that day comes, I hope you only experience pain. So much fucking pain.”

“What the fuck did you just say?” My body jolts upright as I look at the doorway, seeing Hades standing there with an absolutely menacing look on his face.

His eyes fall on mine, dropping to assess my body. His body coils tighter with each inch he passes. He looks seconds away from tearing out of his skin and burning this fucking house down.

Alastor steps up beside him, glancing at me with a look of horror.

“Fuck. Fuck!” He shoves past Hades and goes to my bed, ripping the covers off with one quick pull. “Help me get her down!” Alastor rushes to me, and that seems to snap Hades out of his trance. He moves toward me in quick steps, reaching behind him and unsheathing his knife. With one quick swipe, he slices through the rope. I begin to fall once I feel the rope unravel from my skin, but Alastor is there, wrapping the blanket around me and lifting me into his arms. “What the fuck,” Alastor moans, sounding like he’s holding back a sob.

I stare at my brother with shame, wishing he didn’t have to see me like this, but can’t find the words in me to say anything. I just look at him with sadness.

He shakes his head, dropping his eyes from mine.

Hades can’t even come near me.

Alastor puts me on the bed, and I can’t move a muscle as I watch all the men stand there, unsure of what to do next.

Liam starts laughing again.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Kennedy snaps, bursting through the door. He looks around at the chaos, his face draining to the whitest white I’ve ever seen. “Shit,” he croaks, looking as if he’s about to be sick.

“Welcome to the party,” he garbles, spitting out a glob of blood on my carpet.

Brennan and Kennedy look at Hades, who looks at Alastor. All of them glance at each other, and slowly, Alastor and Hades make their way to Liam.

Brennan pulls Liam off the wall, dragging him to the center of the room.

Alastor pulls his gun from his holster, and Hades raises his hand toward him. “Adrianna is hiding downstairs. I don’t want to scare her any more than I’m sure she already is.”

Alastor nods, shoving his gun back into his holster and pulling out a knife.

Hades does the same.

Brennan grabs his own knife, dropping Liam in the middle of them.

Kennedy swallows audibly, pulling his own blade out.

Liam sits on the ground, seeming to come to terms with his fate. Though he doesn’t seem upset in the slightest. The cocky look on his face speaks differently.

“I don’t need to know why,” Hades begins. “I’m going to assume your fucked-up bloodline made you some kind of psychopath. You played it well, Liam. I trusted you. We all did. I never would’ve assumed it was you. But, now that I know it was you, there’s nothing I want more than to have the love of my life watch your life end right before her eyes.” He glances up at me before turning his gaze back to Liam. “It won’t get her justice, but knowing you’re nothing but a body of bones, just like your fucking father, will hopefully bring her a little bit of peace.”

Liam blinks at him. “I take it back.”

Hades narrows his eyes. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Liam turns his eyes to me. “I should’ve fucking defiled you just like my father did. Tore you apart from the inside out. Maybe put a baby in your belly, so you’d always have a fucking piece of my bloodline.”

My breath catches in my throat, and I want to vomit all over again.

The men tense, all four of them, drawing their knives as they stand above Liam.

They glance at Hades, and after a moment, Hades nods.

He bends down, sinking the knife into Liam’s chest. I swallow, my mouth watering, my eyes leaking as I listen to the knife whip through air. I swear I can hear it sink beneath his skin, into his muscle.

Liam grunts, and Kennedy follows suit, bending down and shoving his own knife into Liam’s stomach.

Brennan sinks his into his thigh.

The three of them find a rhythm, each of them pulling their knives out and sinking it back into Liam’s body. Liam jolts with each stab, his body loosening with each second.

I watch my cream-colored carpet turn a dark red, almost black.

It goes on for so long. I can’t blink, my eyes burning from keeping them opened without blinking once.

I’m emotionless, numb as I watch the killer finally die in front of me.

My friend.

Their friend.

Liam dies in front of my eyes. I watch as the light leaves him, as his soul leaves his body.

But they don’t stop. They don’t dare stop.

Each of their faces hold determination. Sweat trails down their skin, but they don’t slow down. Their need to inflict pain is powerful. It fills the room, thickening the air.

Until as one, they stop.

They rise to a stand, each of them dripping with blood from their clothes and hands.

Hades drops his blade, and it bounces off Liam before clattering to his side.

Slowly, Hades turns around and stares at me. His eyes are black, his chest heaving, as if he just now realizes I was watching him the entire time. He doesn’t seem fully here, as if he’s still lost in the moment where he took his best friend’s life.

“Butterfly,” he rasps.

I want to reach for him, but I don’t know if I have it in me to move. And honestly, there’s a part of me that fears him. Not because he would hurt me, but because he’s unaware of where he is.

Though, I know he knows what he’s done.

“Hades?” I whisper.

“Vivianna, are you okay?” Brennan asks, taking a step toward me.

I tense, not out of fear, but embarrassment.

He frowns. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

I nod. I know he won’t. But they all saw me, naked, afraid, bleeding.

Once again, in a position where I was moments from death, they had to save me.

Though, this time, my brother had to see me in this position as well.

“I hate…” I clear my throat, my voice barely audible. “I hate that you guys saw me like this.”

“We don’t care, Villain,” Kennedy rasps, shaking his head as he stares at the ground. “We’re just happy that you’re okay.”

“Are you okay?” Brennan asks.

I shrug, then shake my head, dropping it between my shoulders. “I don’t think so,” I weep. “Where is Adrianna? Is she okay?”

“Alastor has her. I’ll go make sure they’re okay,” Brennan mumbles as he turns toward the doorway.

“Don’t bring her in here!” I shout, then instantly feel bad. “I just… I don’t want her to see me like this.”

“I know. I know.” He walks away, his shoulders slouched as if he’s feeling just as beaten down as I was.

Hades walks up to me after a moment, cautiously, as if I’ll bolt at any moment. He looks like a monster, covered in blood with a face of a murderer. I know who he is. I know who he’s always been. He doesn’t scare me.

I shift slightly, wincing. The blanket around me grows damp with my blood, and I know I need to be cleaned up before any of these wounds grow infected.

He reaches the foot of the bed, crouching down, keeping a distance.

I hate the distance.

Tentatively, he reaches a hand out, and I can see from the corner of my eye as Kennedy makes his way out of the room, giving us privacy. Liam remains on the ground, torn to shreds, a pile of bones.

Just as Hades promised.

“Vivianna?” Hades asks quietly.

I blink at him, his face blurry from my tears.

“Yeah?” I croak.

“It’s done. It’s over now.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“Are you okay?” he murmurs.

I shake my head. “No, I’m not.”

A sob breaks from my chest, and he moves forward, forgetting about my wounds as he pulls me into his arms. He holds me tightly, pressing his hand to the back of my head, he buries my face into his shoulder. I let out a sob, so sad, so happy that it’s over, and hate how I had to be near death, once again.

“I know it hurts, but it won’t hurt forever. I promise you that.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know if that’s true. It hurts so bad.”

“You’re so strong, butterfly. I’ll help you heal, just like I always do. I love you.”

“I love you,” I sob, clutching onto him with bloody knuckles.

“No matter how long it takes, I’ll help you fly again. And this time, I promise you. You’ll be free, and I’ll be free with you.”

# Chapter Twenty

## Hades

W

hen you were sixteen, did you ever imagine this would be your life?” Alastor asks beside me, pulling on the end of his joint. He extends his hand, passing the smoking paper to me.

I shake my head, my eyes on the two women in my life.

“Never in a million years.”

Alastor chuckles. “Me neither.”

Vivianna giggles, bending down slowly and placing another rock on the snowman. Her face is bright red from the cold, the lashing scar across her face accentuated, raised against what usually is her creamy skin.

Adrianna jumps up and down, though she barely gets an inch off the ground with all the snow gear on her. Her face is also rosy, but she doesn’t seem to mind the cold as she builds her first ever snowman.

“It all turned out for the best, though, didn’t it?” he asks, his eyes on his sister and niece.

Did it?

It ended where it was supposed to, though the road was a long, hard one.

We all endured so much, though Vivianna endured the most of us all.

Some days are better than others.

Sometimes, I can barely get her out of bed. She lays there most of the day, buried under the covers, and stares at the wall.

I give her that day. To mourn, grieve, process her emotions.

The next day, I always kick her ass out of bed.

I drag her by her ankles if I have to. She’s allowed her days, of course, but my butterfly needs to live. I told her she needs to fly, to heal, and that I’d help her with it.

Though, if she never tries to fly again, she’ll never know if she’s able to.

Once I’m able to get her from bed and starting her day, she’s able to function. For the most part, anyway.

She’s strong. To even survive what she’s been through, she’s a fucking warrior. I don’t know many men who would be able to survive what she’s been through.

I watch her—how she’s healed, how she’s grown.

She’s so beautiful.

It’s been three months since Liam bled out on our bedroom carpet.

It didn’t take much to get rid of his body. Many of us don’t have family.

He doesn’t have anyone looking for him.

We killed his dad, after all.

We buried his bones in the mountains behind our house, knowing it’s a place they’d never be found.

The carpet was ripped out and replaced, and it was as if he was never there.

Though we know he was. I watch Vivianna’s eyes linger on the spot every time she enters the room.

I’m not going to let him taint our house, though. However long it takes, we’ll move on. We’ll heal, and Liam will have ceased to exist.

“Dude, the food is almost ready. Are you guys coming to eat?” Kennedy asks from inside.

I nod to him as Brennan walks around the side of the house with a case of beer and a bag of buns.

Middle of winter, and we’re grilling. For what reason? Absolutely nothing.

Except maybe, we’ve got no more bullshit to deal with. It’s been three months of absolute peace. You’d think we’d grow bored at this point, but I think we’re all just happy for a little relief. Nothing to keep us on the edge of our toes or have our hands poised against our pistols.

We’re just at ease. Not fully—never fully. But enough where we can just enjoy our lives, for once.

“I’ve got beer,” Brennan mumbles, trudging through the snow. He shakes out his leg, snow flying in every direction. “Why we decide to live in the mountains is seriously beyond me.”

“Did you get pot as well?” Alastor asks as he stubs out the roach of the joint into the ashtray on the table between us.

“Fuck off, Alastor,” Brennan snaps.

Alastor laughs. “Well, did you?”

Brennan cuts a harsh glare Alastor’s way. “Yes, asshole.”

“Uncle Brennan said a bad word!” Adrianna screams, pointing at Brennan.

Brennan drops his head between his shoulders and lets out a sigh. “Sorry, Adri. I’ll leave five on the counter for you.”

This girl is going to become rich before she’s even an adult from living with us.

Adrianna laughs, going back to Vivianna as they finish crafting their snowman.

I stand up, watching my butterfly have a flicker of peace on her face. I hate interrupting her happiness. I’d rather sit on the sidelines and watch her smile all day. Sometimes the smiles are daily occurrences, and sometimes they are few and far between.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I step through the already made footprints in the snow as I walk up to my girls.

She turns around when she hears my footsteps. She smiles wildly, and if I wasn’t certain there was nothing but an empty, rotted soul beneath my rib cage, I’d almost wonder if I had my own butterflies flapping about.

“Coming to help build a snowman?” she asks, snowflakes wetting her eyelashes.

I chuckle, giving a small shake of my head. Truth is, I don’t think I’ve ever built a snowman in my entire life.

“No, it’s time to eat.”

“No!” Adrianna shouts, running to hide behind the snowman. “I don’t want to go inside. I’m not hungry!”

Vivianna sighs, and I can see the beginnings of fatigue in her eyes.

“I’ll grab her,” I mumble to Vivianna. She nods, brushing the snow off her clothes as she makes her way toward her brother.

Turning toward Adrianna, I extend my hand. “Adrianna, it’s time to go inside. Come on.”

“I don’t want to!” she pouts.

Taking another step toward her, I take a deep breath. Raising a child isn’t easy, mostly when you have not got a single paternal bone in your body.

It comes naturally with Adrianna, though there are times I still feel well out of my element.

“Adrianna, do you remember what I said about listening?”

She peeks her head around the snowman’s shoulder. “Yes,” she grumbles.

I cock an eyebrow. “And what was that?”

She frowns. “That when kids don’t listen to their parents they will grow up and be miserable old souls with no hair and pimples and probably end up in the jailhouse.”

I smirk at her. “That’s right.”

Her shoulders slump and she walks around the snowman, swinging her hand out and grabbing mine. “But… I have a question.”

I give her mitten-covered hand a squeeze. “Go for it, kid.”

“Why is jail bad?”

“It’s where bad people go when they do bad things. It’s lonely, and cold. And you have to live with other people who didn’t listen to their parents, so they’re all bald and pimply and don’t listen. How fun would that be?”

Her nose wrinkles. “Ew.”

I nod, pleased with her answer. “Exactly. Listen to your parents and you’ll be golden.”

There’s a hop in her step as we walk toward the house. “You also told me you’d get me a pony for my birthday if I listened really well.”

My teeth grind together. I wish I never said that. I really, really wish I never said that.

“I sure did. But you’ve got to listen really well. To your mom, and to me.”

She beams, and it looks so much like Vivianna my heart shatters and comes back together. It’s Vivianna’s smile without pain, torment, or scars. It’s Vivianna when she was young, in her room, dancing like a ballerina to music and pretending to be a butterfly.

My heart hurts.

*Heal, butterfly. Heal.*

“I will. I’ll always listen. I don’t want to go have a sleepover with people who have no hair and pimples. I’d much rather stay at home with you guys.”

My insides twist with pain and love. “Me too, Adrianna.”

We make it to the patio, the door to the house closed and the voices inside loud. Just as I reach for the door, Adrianna tugs slightly on my hand.

I turn around, thinking something is wrong, but she’s looking up at me with an emotion that always strikes me.

It can bring a grown man to his knees.

“I love you, Daddy.”

My eyes fall closed, and I take a deep breath before glancing back at her.

“I love you too, Adrianna.”

When the love came from her, I don’t know.

When the title of father came from her, I don’t know.

But it just happened, as if she knew I was it for her, just as she is it for me.

I’ve disappointed a lot of people in my life, but I never, ever want to disappoint this girl that’s given me her heart, her trust, and love.

I knew I was her father from the moment she was born, even if we don’t share the same blood. And now, even more so. As I raise her, as I teach her and guide her. As I love her.

Adrianna is my daughter, and I think she finally knows that I’m her father.

Holding hands, we step inside, the scent of barbeque chicken and hamburgers filling the air. With all the commotion around us, Adrianna unlinks our hands, scurrying off to go talk to everyone and anyone.

My eyes immediately connect with Vivianna’s, and I walk up to her, brushing her hair from the back of her neck as I slip in the chair beside her. Her hands are curled on her lap, and I slide my hand under the table, brushing my fingers across her knuckles. Scars scatter across her skin, faded, yet still present.

She looks over at me, as if she knows my thoughts. A darkness flickers into her eyes, and she darts them down to her empty plate in front of her.

“Knock it off, Vivianna,” I clip under my breath.

She attempts to pull her hand away, but I curl my fingers tighter, keeping them entwined on her lap.

Turning her gaze to me, head-on, I can see the worst scar of all. They’re all across her body, yet the most prominent one is the one on her face. From her right eyebrow to her left upper lip, a thin, red line slices across her skin.

Vivianna finds herself ugly—a monster, she says.

I think she’s the most beautiful butterfly I’d ever seen. And her scars only make her more beautiful.

Her lower lip wobbles slightly, as if she can read my thoughts.

Lifting my free hand, I press it against her unblemished cheek, brushing my finger against her skin. Leaning forward, I press my lips against the shell of her ear.

“You should never be ashamed of who you are, butterfly. Quit hiding your imperfections as if they are imperfections at all. They make you, you. I’m in love with each scar, each bump, every bruise. They are a part of you, Vivianna. Let me love your imperfections just as much as I love you.”

I can feel her shudder against me, and I want to clutch her close to my body, though I know she’ll feel even more embarrassed. She hates showing her weakness, around me, around other people. More now than ever.

“Look at me,” I whisper.

She glances up at me.

“Let me love your imperfections just as much as I love you,” I repeat.

She looks at me for a moment, her eyes darting between mine, as if she needs to decide the truth to my words.

*Let me love your imperfections just as much as I love you.*

She nods, her body relaxing slightly.

And finally, her heart opens up after three months, and she lets me in.

“Okay. I love you, Hades Gray,” she whispers, giving my hand a squeeze.

I smirk, knowing it’s impossible to love her more, yet I do. Every day, I do.

“Well, isn’t this the most unconventional family dinner I’ve ever seen. But I do have to say, it’s also my favorite,” Alastor says, sitting on the other side of Adrianna.

Healthy. Happy.

All of us.

Giving Vivianna’s hand a squeeze, she looks up at me just as I glance over at her. “Yeah, it’s pretty perfect.”

# Epilogue

## Vivianna

I

t’s happening.

I know it’s happening.

I can barely breathe, and it’s not just because the shower is running to its hottest temperature, the bathroom filled with steam so thick I can barely see my naked thighs.

It’s because as I stare at the box of tampons on the small shelf underneath the sink, I realize it’s been a little too long since I’ve had my last period.

Like, a couple weeks over.

My thighs begin to shake, and I press my hands against my knees to stop the trembling. It barely does a thing, though. All it does is cause my hands to begin shaking as well.

“Fuck, what am I supposed to do?” The heat in the room starts to make me feel nauseous. I leap off the toilet, sprinting across the bathroom naked and slamming the shower faucet off.

The steam is still present, though it quickly dissipates. I stumble to the sink, curling my fingers around the edges, and drop my head. I gasp in a breath, not sure I’m ready for this.

Though a part of me feels like I am ready.

I know Hades is ready.

I lift my left hand, glancing at the gold band with the rose-colored stone.

I’ve been married two years now. A ceremony only minutes from our home, between two tall mountains in the middle of summer. It was still cool, but the colors were vibrant that day, almost as if the universe wanted to give Hades and I something special.

It was just us, with Adrianna between us and Alastor, Kennedy, Brennan, Rachel, and Soren. The officiant that married us was laid-back, quick, and then let us go about our day.

It was special. No, it was perfect. The wedding of a lifetime.

I’m no longer Vivianna Finch.

I’m Vivianna Gray.

And Adrianna had her birth certificate changed. She is now Adrianna Gray.

In the little over two years that I’ve been married to Hades, he hasn’t once mentioned having a baby. I don’t know if he thinks Adrianna is enough, or if he just doesn’t want to have a child.

The thought terrifies me.

What if he’s angry?

A panic attack begins, one I haven’t had in years. It clutches my chest and makes a vicious sweat break out along the back of my neck.

What am I supposed to do?

“Fuck.” I slap the counter, tears burning the backs of my eyes.

Whether or not he’s going to be happy about it, I need to tell him.

But first, I want to be sure.

I turn back to the shower, feeling like I have somewhat of a plan. Turning on the faucet, I jump in, taking the quickest shower I possibly can.

Thankfully, Adrianna is at preschool still and I have about two hours before I have to go pick her up for the day.

As quick as I can, I get cleaned up and jump out, throwing on a pair of joggers and a hoodie. I don’t even pause at the spot on the carpet, though I never walk on the place where Liam’s body once lay.

It’s like a forbidden area of the carpet.

Hades doesn’t care. I think he purposely walks on that spot, wanting to wear it down. I’m sure he laughs about Liam’s death in his head. It hurt him, sure, but after everything he’s done, I know he doesn’t regret his actions at all, not even slightly.

I shake my head, clearing my thoughts of Liam. They don’t belong here. Not at all, but especially not today.

Rushing down the stairs, I grab my car keys off the table and slip on a pair of Converse. Making my way into the garage, I slip into the Audi and power it on, reversing out of the drive without a second thought.

I barely register the drive to the local drug store, my mind running a million miles a minute.

Elation and fear, panic and excitement, every possible emotion runs through me as I grab two of every type of pregnancy test they have. The lady at the register says something to me, but I don’t hear a word she says as I grab the bag from her, mumbling a thank-you and jogging out of the store.

I get home faster than I was able to make it to the store. The bag of pregnancy tests bounces against my leg as I sprint into the house and up the stairs.

Once I get to the bathroom, I grab the bottom of the bag and dump it upside down onto the floor in front of the toilet.

I grab one, tearing into the box and pulling the test out.

It’s not until I sit down on the toilet that I realize one thing.

I don’t have to pee.

I tilt my head back, closing my eyes as I let out a groan.

Shit.

I check my phone.

One hour until I have to pick up Adrianna.

I burst out of the bathroom and downstairs, grabbing a Fiji Water from the fridge. I down half of it, my stomach instantly hurting from the ice-cold water sloshing around in my empty stomach.

It takes twenty minutes until I get the first inklings to go to the bathroom.

Forty minutes until I have to get Adrianna.

I open every box, lining up the pregnancy tests as I sit down on the toilet.

Peeing on a stick is not only uncomfortable, but it is literally never a clean task.

Eight tests lined up in front of me, and I set a timer on my phone as I pace the length of the bathroom.

Thirty minutes until I have to get Adrianna.

The annoying blare goes off on my phone twenty-five minutes before I have to leave. But I barely have the courage to look at them.

Should I call Rachel? Soren?

I shake my head. No, if I’m calling anyone, it needs to be Hades.

“Just get it over with,” I mumble under my breath.

Pausing in front of them, I crouch down, allowing my eyes to land on the one in the center.

Pregnant.

And the next one.

Two lines.

Next.

Pregnant.

Pregnant.

Two lines.

Two lines.

Pregnant.

*Pregnant.*

I’m fucking pregnant.

A weird, animalistic noise breaks from my throat. Tears flow down my cheeks, my hand automatically falling to my lower stomach.

I’m having a baby.

Hades’s baby.

Ten minutes until I have to get Adrianna.

I gather up the pregnancy tests, putting them into the plastic bag and shoving them under the cabinet.

I need to tell Hades. I need to figure out how I’m going to tell Hades.

~

“I need to talk to you,” I tell Hades later that night.

He’s been watching me oddly all evening. He knows something’s up, though I’ve been trying to keep my cool.

He always knows when something’s on my mind.

He undoes his leather jacket, hanging it with care over the chair in the corner of the room. He turns his head, lifting his eyebrow as he glances at me. “I knew something was up.”

I slide deeper under the covers, my hand discreetly going to my abdomen. “I know.”

Walking over to me, he sits down on the edge of the bed, bending down and undoing his shoes. “What’s going on, butterfly?”

He gives me his back, not realizing how big of a conversation we’re about to have.

I say nothing, and he turns around, a look of concern falling over his face. “What is it, Vivianna?”

I pull the covers back, crawling across the bed until I’m kneeling in front of him. I don’t say a word as I extend my hand for his.

He looks confused as he places his hand in mine.

I pull his hand to my lower stomach, placing it over my shirt.

He frowns for a second as he watches his hand. After a moment, his eyes widen, and he looks at me in shock. “What are you saying?”

I tilt my head to the side softly, not saying a word.

“You’re pregnant.” A statement, not a question.

I nod my head.

His body stiffens, and I’m worried he’s going to pull his hand away, but instead he moves closer, his hands curling slightly over my shirt. “You’re having a baby. You’re having my baby.”

I nod, letting out a small laughing cry. “Yeah. We’re having a baby. You’re going to be a father.”

He frowns. “I am a father, Vivianna. I’ve been a father for many years.”

That makes the tears flow faster.

“I know,” I say softly.

His hand moves over my stomach, as if he’s mesmerized, imagining his baby beneath my skin. “My baby.”

I sigh into him, leaning toward him. He wraps his arms around me, dragging me up the bed until my head hits the pillow.

He hovers over me, our noses nearly touching. Our bodies align, each inch of us touching.

“We’re having a baby,” he rasps.

I nod. “Yeah, we’re having a baby.”

He lets out a sigh, as if it’s a relief.

“You want to have a baby?” I whisper.

He takes his time peeling my clothes off. “I’ve wanted to have a baby with you forever. Always. This is the best news I’ve ever had.”

He pulls the covers over our bodies, both of us undressed, skin against skin.

He slips inside me, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist. We move as one, our bodies aligned. He’s gentle with me, more gentle than he’s ever been.

Dragging his hand from my waist and up my rib cage. He drags his fingers up my neck, holding it gently as he thrusts into me. “Say thank you for putting a baby in your belly.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” I moan, arching into him.

“Good girl.” He drags his fingers around my chin, his thumb pressing against my lower lip. My mouth pops open, his thumb pressing against my tongue.

His thrusts speed up, and I clamp my teeth around his thumb. He drags it out, his skin scraping against my teeth.

“My perfect little butterfly. So fucking beautiful.”

I whimper, feeling the tension coil deep in the lower end of my stomach. My limbs start to tingle, each thrust hitting that spot deep within my stomach.

“I love you, Hades.”

“Daddy,” he growls.

“I love you, Daddy.”

He groans, a raspy sound in the back of his throat. That does it for me. My body misfires, shooting off in a thousand different directions. I moan, tears slipping down my temples as I reach out, wrapping my hands around his back, my nails scraping down his skin.

He follows suit, his body tensing as he empties himself inside me.

He has for a while, and I now realize his intent. He’s been wanting a baby. He even made a nursery when we moved in.

I reach up, my fingers tracing along his jawline. “You’re going to be the best father to this baby, Hades. I love you.”

His hand reaches out, his fingers tracing along the wedding band on my ring finger. He squeezes my hand gently, his eyes boring into mine. “I’ll be the best father to our children. I’ll always take care of them, just as I’ll always take care of you, butterfly.”

“I know,” I whisper, nuzzling against the side of his arm.

And I do know. Hades is not the hero, but he’s my protector. My savior.

My husband.

My captor.

My forever.

He healed my wings, let me be free, and I did. With him.

The End.