

EITHER I'LL SAVE HIM
OR HE'LL BREAK ME

WICKED FATE

V SIMRAN

WICKED

FATE

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Wicked Fate

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DEDICATION

To Nupur,

*For being my biggest cheerleader and loving me unconditionally.
I love you, my sweet little sister.*

Trigger Warning

Before you begin, I would like to warn that this book is not conventionally dark but it does possess themes that may make some readers uncomfortable. There are scenes which fall under dub-con, rough sex and a hero who pushes your limits. If that scares you, please think before you read.

And for those who all are intrigued, I promise your panties will be soaked by the time you finish. Enjoy ;)

PLAYLIST

1. War of hearts – Ruelle
2. Formula – Labrinth
3. Fire breather – LAUREL
4. Arcade – Duncan Laurence
5. Infinity – Jaymes Young
6. Heartburn – Felix Cartel Remix
7. Hypnotic – Zella Day
8. Too close – Alex Clare
9. Twisted games – Night Panda, Krigare
10. Bleeding out – Imagine Dragons
11. Unsteady – X Ambassadors

12. LAY LAY (Remix) – Nikolin Patrev, Gabidulin, Primodrum

13. Falling Apart – Michael Schulte

14. Belladona – Ava Max

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
'CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

ARAV (*A Year Ago*)

It's warm, yet all I feel is bone-deep coldness.

Numbness and deadness inside.

The night I found my son dead, my life became a hellish nightmare.

My eyes burn with tears as I lower my six-month-old son get into the ground, soon to be burnt into ashes and bones. My precious boy whom I'd vowed to protect the day he was born.

I failed.

He's gone from the world before he could even begin his life.

Every time I close my eyes, all I can see is his lifeless and pale body, haunting me and slowly eating away at my soul. If only I could have reached him in time. If only I had listened to the feeling in my gut. It's my fault my son has been taken away from me.

The flames burn higher and higher, and so does the intensifying pain in my chest. And by the time they slowly simmer down, the iciness has already weaved its way inside my heart again. The helplessness turned to anger, the kind that consumes and breathes just below the surface.

Walking to where the ashes lay beneath my feet, still fiery hot, I kneel down and ask my son for his forgiveness and say goodbye to him one last time. He will never be forgotten.

I make a vow right here.

I may have failed in protecting him, but I will avenge his death.

I will hunt his killer down, and then...

They will pay.

CHAPTER 1

MAIRA

(Present)

The hills and valleys of Manali are a beauty of nature. Mesmerizing and breathtaking. Even the air feels fresh and pure, caressing your skin like a warm hug on a cold winter's night. I have never seen such beauty this close that touches your soul with a single glance. As I sit in the back of the cab on my way to the rustic yet pretty looking cabin I'd booked, I watch the scenery pass me by. I was planning to travel by bus, but it would have required making conversation with strangers, and that's the last thing I want to do.

"Are you here for the first time, Miss?" asks the cab driver, watching me from the front. Well, I guess my plan of having a quiet ride failed. I'll never understand why people feel the need to fill the silence with mindless talk—especially strangers. I'm the kind of person who prefers music instead while enjoying the ride, especially with gorgeous surroundings.

"Yes, it might as well be, because I was quite young when I first visited this place with my parents. I don't remember much, only fuzzy memories," I answer quietly, hoping his curiosity is satisfied.

"Well, enjoy your stay here. I see lots of young kids like you travelling solo. Must be thrilling, being on your own." He sounds fascinated and smiles warmly. If only he knew the truth. Sight-seeing is the last thing on my mind. As soon as I reach the cabin, I'm going to stay cozied in and work on making myself better. I'm going to connect with a part of me that I lost in the chaos of last year. Finding the courage to actually come here was a big step for me. Eventually, when I feel better, I'll visit all the picturesque sights this place has to offer.

"Sometimes, you just want to run away from the chaos of the city," I explain to him, and he goes quiet for a minute, silently watching me from the rearview mirror. His stare suddenly begins to feel cautious, as though my words triggered some kind of memory and he's deciding whether or not to reveal it. A nervous tic starts in my belly and dips low when he speaks.

"The mountains have their own tales to tell, and they aren't all that pretty," he says creepily.

"What do you mean?" I ask as I sit up straight in the backseat.

"Don't be scared," he says. He must see the nervousness on my face. "I'm only telling you

because you're here alone, and the curiosity you young people possess these days leads to exploring places where it's best to stay away from."

"I don't understand." I'm so confused by his cryptic statements. Another reason to not talk to strangers. Why can't people just be straight instead of talking in circles?

"Old souls haunt the town near the cabin where you're staying, Miss. People have been lost and never found. At least, not how they used to be," he warns.

"Are you talking about ghosts?" I ask incredulously. Is he kidding me? I thought perhaps he was warning away from a bad crowd or edgy places.

"Bad things have happened. You shouldn't ignore the stories when someone inevitably tells you, madam. The rest is up to you."

"Ghosts don't scare me anymore." I ease his mind. *I've learnt to live with them.* Looking up, I notice he's about to ask something else, but I interrupt him. "Could you please play some songs? I need something to distract me from the twists and turns," I request politely, since he's only being protective.

"Of course, miss." He gives a small smile and focuses his attention on the road ahead. I steer my mind away from the earlier conversation. It's the last thing I need to worry about.

My heart stays in my throat the whole ride as we go up higher and higher over the mountains, but I can't help but steal glances of the depth and the height. My stomach bottoms out whenever I shake due to slight bumps, or when the car takes a narrow turn and all I can see is darkness and tall pine trees when I gaze downwards. It makes me feel small and inconsequential. If I were to die, no one would even find my body.

At the same time, when I look up at the vibrant blue sky filled with clouds that look so close, that if I were to reach, I'm almost sure I could touch them... it makes me wanna fly with the wind caressing my face and a sense of freedom. It's frightening and startling that I have never felt so close to death and life at the same time. One twist of fate and you could either be at the bottom of the hill or alive at the peak. This sensation is how I'll always think of the mountains.

I finally begin to breathe easier when the narrow turns end and we reach a small village with people running up and down the streets, some staring from their terraces, all with a smile and happiness on their faces. I desperately wish to feel this way again, and as we turn onto an empty road with trees and hills on both sides, I'm able to make out a stunning cabin at the end of the road. It's single story and looks old yet steady with a porch in the front. There's a window on the above floor, and I really hope it's a bedroom so that the morning light is the one to wake me up. A little excitement blooms in my chest, knowing I'll be spending the next few months here.

When the cab finally stops a few feet away, I open my door and step out with my small handbag on my shoulders. The driver helps me pull out the rest of the stuff from the back, and since I booked my ride online with the payment done, I simply thank him and watch him drive away. Even

though it's the afternoon, the weather is still cold and shivers race down my spine. Not wanting to stay outside any longer, I roll my suitcases towards the front door and look for the keys that I was told would be found under the mat on the porch.

I bend over to lift the mat and push it aside so I can pick up the keys, but just as I do, the front door bangs open, followed by a rough and annoyed voice from right above me.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

I'm so shocked at the unexpected voice and the fact I'm not alone that a scared yelp passes my dry lips, and I almost fall on my ass with my heart beating out of my chest. My gaze first follows the bare and big feet, to the legs encased in denim jeans, and I can't help but admire the strong thighs pressing against the worn-out material with the button undone, hanging dangerously low on the V of his hips. If I look closely, I can also make out the bulge there. I gulp when my eyes keep moving upwards to the naked chest, ripped with muscles that I didn't even know existed in one's body, and finally land on the mean looking face of the man currently throwing daggers at me with his *oh-my-god* dark green eyes, the exact shade of the tall trees I saw on my way. But why does he look so mad at me?

When he raises his left eyebrow mockingly, I realize too late that I'm still sitting on my ass in front of this scary yet handsome man. Pushing up on my elbows, I stand up wobbly and avoid looking anywhere below his face. *Damn those chiseled eight-pack abs.* My brain finally starts working again, and I wonder if I mistakenly came to the wrong cabin, because no one was supposed to be living here.

“Is there any reason why you're trespassing on this private property in the middle of the day?” he rumbles at me.

“Is this 34 Wander Inn Cabin?” I ask him instead. He looks pissed at my question but chooses to answer.

“Yes.”

“Well then you're the one trespassing,” I challenge. “Now leave, before I call the cops.”

He must have found the keys under the mat and chosen to stay, since nobody was here to stop him. But that doesn't go with the vibe he's giving and the look of disgust on his face at even the suggestion of such an accusation. It's the only explanation... or else there has been a huge misunderstanding. When he sucks in a frustrated breath, his abs tighten even more and I feel heat pool between my thighs. I hate the effect this stranger is having on me, and I hate his attitude even more.

“Excuse me.” He takes a step forward and crosses his arms in front of his hard chest.

“You heard me. I booked this cabin for the next few months,” I stand my ground and raise my chin to appear confident and not feel small compared to his tall and broad frame.

“So have I. And I certainly didn’t ask for a roommate, so go find somewhere else to stay.” He rudely dismisses me and turns around, slamming the door in my face. I’m left shocked once again.

Taking the steps leading to the porch, I start banging on the door until it’s hauled open again. He does it with so much force that I lose my balance yet again, but this time he catches me by the elbows and steadies me. So he does have some manners—and great reflexes. Despite his cold behavior, his hands feel warm even through my thin sweater.

“Do you fall on your ass every other minute, woman?” he growls.

“I wouldn’t if you knew how to open a goddamn door. Do you plan on breaking it?”

He curses and lets me go. My jaw drops when I hear him call me a brat under his breath while shaking his head. I want to call him out on it, but somehow I manage to focus on what’s really important.

“Look, there has to be some kind of misunderstanding. I didn’t ask for a roommate either. Let’s just call and get it sorted out. Then you can leave.” I smirk, which only pisses him off further.

“Your ass is the one that’s going to be leaving. Oh wait... you only know how to fall on it.” He grins arrogantly. It takes all my willpower not to punch him in his chiseled face.

“We’ll see.”

“Wait here while I get this sorted out.” He turns to walk inside, but my voice stops him.

“Since it’s not exactly your cabin, I don’t think you can order me to wait outside in the cold.” Before he can utter another word, I take both my suitcases and storm past him inside. He’s in for a rude awakening if he thinks he can boss me around.

While from outside, the cabin looks old and a little worn out, the interior is all modern, shiny wooden floors, warm and inviting. There’s a sleek kitchen a little further on my left, and a living room with an old fashioned fireplace on my right. It’s decorated with a long couch, a low coffee table in the front and a dark red rug covering the flooring. There’s also a short hallway ahead of me, and I guess a small storage place, because the bedrooms are upstairs based on the pictures I saw on the website. I’m really impressed with how well maintained this place is. Now, I just need to get rid of the man so I can have my peace.

I turn around when I hear the door shut behind me, followed by his steps.

“Don’t make yourself home just yet.” He scoffs at me and god! Why can’t he just button his jeans? They look close to falling off if he takes any more steps. Also, who needs eight-pack abs? But again, judging by the size of his ego, he wouldn’t be satisfied with a six-pack. *I’m distracted again.*

“You’re so fucking rude.” I lose my patience.

“And you’re a pain in the ass,” he throws back, going into the kitchen to grab his phone from

the counter and sitting down on one of the stools. I walk and stand opposite him while he calls the owner. *Please let me have this cabin. I don't want to go back.*

“Hey. Can I please know under whose name 34 Wander Inn Cabin was booked? Because there's definitely been some kind of misunderstanding.” He speaks to whomever is on the phone while I wait with bated breath. I can't even tell by the blank look on his face.

“How the hell can you double book it when I specifically asked for myself alone?” he barks, and I lose all hope. How the hell am I going to find a new cabin? I don't even have that much in savings. I tune him out and don't bother standing around. I walk into the living room while I try to come up with ideas to get this man to leave. There's no way I'm giving this place up.

I look up just in time to see him hang up the phone. He looks even angrier, if that's possible. Somehow, it only enhances his dark features, and I notice how his full lips form a deep line, and his sharp jawline which is covered in a short and trimmed beard. His dark green eyes shine lightly when he stares ahead. His nose is a little crooked but fits his face perfectly. There's no doubt he's attractive in a rough, bad-boy kind of way. But there's something in his eyes that tells me he's hiding from the world, fighting a pain with a broken soul just like I am.

The look of pain is suddenly gone from his eyes, and the earlier cold and rude man is back. A part of me feels relieved that I might not be the only damaged one, but while I'm here to heal myself, I don't know if he is too. He stands up to his full height and I breathe easier when I see he's managed to button up his jeans at least. It was damn hard not to notice the deep V with a trail of hairs leading to his heavy bulge. I don't think my body could have handled all his naked glory. *Bet it would be a sight to see.*

I manage to avert my eyes before he can see where my attention is, but his next words stop me cold in my tracks and panic settles in.

“Looks like you and I are going to be roommates, princess.”

CHAPTER 2

ARAV

“Oh hell no.”

The feeling's fucking mutual, but I manage to keep my mouth shut, since she looks close to passing out. I only prefer women passing out in front of me from pleasure. Definitely not from this. The thought of pleasuring puts a vivid image of her in my head, on her knees while she patiently waits for my next command. Fuck, it's going to be a torture living with her, if I imagine all the ways I want to get her naked. She needs to go before it gets any more complicated. My plans do not involve a woman, no matter how gorgeous she is with a lithe figure and curves for days.

Just when I thought this day couldn't get any worse, it did. It started with the call from my investigator, then my mother, and, finally, when I found this woman on my doorstep. This place isn't big enough to stay our separate ways without running into one another. Moreover, I don't like anybody disrupting my privacy. And she is the epitome of distraction.

“Then feel free to leave,” I bait her, frustration evident in my voice.

I walk by her to the corner of the couch and grab by shirt and put it on. I had just taken a shower when I heard the noise coming from outside, and it pissed me off so much that somebody was bold enough to come steal in the middle of the day that I only put on my jeans before shoving open the door. I was so startled by a strange woman kneeling at my porch that I didn't even protect her before she tripped and fell at my sudden appearance.

Nothing seems to penetrate my cold heart these days, but I swear when I saw her, there was a little flutter in my chest. My attention then went to her full breasts where the pink knitted sweater was stretched tight due to her position, and leggings that looked painted on.

Then I opened my mouth.

And now she thinks of me as an asshole.

“I know you're not familiar with chivalry, but a gentleman would offer to leave instead,” she says mockingly while managing to look adorable.

“Since when did I give you the impression I'm a gentleman, baby? Besides, it's the 21st century, so an independent woman like you should have no trouble finding a new place. You're not the

only one who got fucked over by the owner,” I remind her.

“Do you honestly expect us to share the cabin?” When I stay silent, she looks shell-shocked. “You’re kidding, right?” Her voice gets a little hopeful. The last thing I want to do is share any space with a woman, but currently we have no other option.

“No I’m not, princess,” I tell her.

“I’m going to talk to the manager.” She starts digging in her purse, probably for her phone. Before she can, I take her small hand in mine and stop her. Unable to resist, I caress the inside of her wrist with my thumb, and she sucks in a small breath as if the touch of our skin electrifies us. When she looks up at me, I realize I’m standing too close to her, so I let go and step back.

“I already did. Turns out, they fired an old employee recently, and as a last fuck-you, he double booked the cabin. Before you ask, no, they don’t have any other cabins available, and at this time of year, it’s going to be hard to find a new inn—more so if you don’t plan on sharing. Since neither of us plans on giving up this cabin, it’s best if we share. It’s small for the both of us. But if you stay out of my way, then I’ll stay out of yours.” Understanding dawns on her and she finally nods her head, knowing this is the best option.

“Fine, but if we’re going to be living together, then we need to set some boundaries or some rules,” she demands with hands on her hips, making me notice how easily I could encircle her tiny waist and grab her heart-shaped ass. But first, she needs to learn I’m not a man she can boss around. I’m the one who makes the rules—and breaks them, if necessary.

“What’s your name?” I demand.

“What?” She looks confused.

“It’s a simple a question. Or do you expect me to call you ‘princess’ every time?” I smirk, at which she rolls her eyes.

“I’m Maira. And you?”

“Arav.” I watch her mouth move as she silently repeats my name while I get the insane urge to hear her say it out loud, just so I know how it sounds coming from her lips.

“So, about the rules,” she starts again, but I cross the rest of the distance and put my finger on her lips, effectively shutting her up. Pressing lower, I gently nudge her chin until her face is tilted towards me. It gives me primal satisfaction that I have the same effect on her and that we’re both feeling the attraction towards each other.

“Let me tell you one thing, Maira. I don’t follow rules. The sooner you learn that, the better.” I wink.

“Clearly you don’t have boundaries, either.” Her gaze drops to my chest, where the top buttons are undone, and she doesn’t even realize that she’s biting her full bottom lip. Standing this

close to her, I can make out every little feature on her beautiful face. Her skin is silky and soft to the touch with lips begging to be sucked. She has a small, pert nose and big brown eyes that almost appear black. Her cheeks are flushed pink, and I wish I knew if it was from cold outside or my effect on her.

“Then why aren’t you pushing me away?” I can’t help but tease. She tenses, her eyes darkening with fire, yet she makes no move. It somehow amuses me and turns me on, but then I remember why I’m here and the smile vanishes from my face. Fuck. This girl is trouble. Letting her go, I turn around and walk down the hall while shouting behind me, “The room upstairs on the right is yours.”

As soon as I’m in my bedroom, I go to the balcony and light a cigarette while looking at the view in front of me. As usual, my thoughts turn to my son and how he would have turned two this year. There was a time when I didn’t have a cold, black heart beating inside me.

I came here to fulfill the promise I made to him on his deathbed.

Instead, I’ve somehow ended up living with a woman who’s managed to make me feel something other than sadness and anger in just few hours. It only makes me even more determined to keep her at bay.

CHAPTER 3

MAIRA

Pushing my last suitcase up the stairs, I huff a small breath while cursing at Arav for not even offering to help, and his hot and cold behavior towards me. Just before he let me go, I saw how his expression locked tight and all humor left his hard face. It only confirms my suspicion that he's fighting demons of his own. Then I curse at myself for letting him get to me and wanting to know his secrets. I guess misery does love company. Walking down the hall, I notice his room is shut and is at the very end. Pushing open the door to my own room, I roll my bags inside and push them against the wall beside door. And when I look up, my jaw drops.

There are no words to describe the view right in front of my eyes. The huge bed is on my right, and facing it, instead of a wall, there's floor-to-ceiling glass with a clear view of snowy hills and tall trees, a vision I'll wake up to every morning. The restlessness and the frustration I was feeling earlier all goes away, and a sense of calm takes root. I only wish the other walls were the same, but still, I can't complain. On the other side of the bed is a nightstand with a mirror right above it. There's a medium sized closet on my left, which is more than enough for my stuff. At the foot of the bed, there's a big chair for me to snuggle in with my book. This room feels like it came straight out of the aesthetics I keep looking at on Pinterest.

I spend the next few hours unpacking my clothes and neatly hanging them in my closet. I even brought most of my books with me as I love to read and put them on the nightstand. It's been a long day, and I feel hungry. I was told there are groceries stocked enough to last for a month, and also takeout menus from the nearby restaurants if I don't feel like cooking. Closing the door behind me, I walk out and I see a door at the end of the hall right next to Arav's room, so I check and find it's a bathroom. Then, I remember it said on the website that there's only one bathroom... which means I'm going to have to share this, too. When I pass by his room, the door is still closed, and there's no sound coming to suggest he's inside. I think of peeking, but my stomach growls and decides for me. I realize I'm being silly. Of course, I can't avoid him every time.

In the kitchen, I move around the counter and open the fridge, finding half-eaten boxes of takeout food, and they look days old. I'll have to ask him to throw them out. There are some fruits and vegetables, but nothing I can cook fast. Shutting it, I pick up my phone, open Swiggy and order chicken schezwan noodles. Looking in the cabinets above the counter, I easily find the plates and forks in the drawer and set up on the table in the drawing room while I wait for the food to arrive. Just then, I hear Arav's footsteps come down the stairs, and my stomach dips with nerves.

I avoid his gaze by staring at my phone and watch him walk around the kitchen and pull out

one of his half-eaten containers from the fridge. With his back facing me, I shamelessly check him out, because there's no denying he's too handsome for his own good with a physique most men would be jealous of. His shape is somewhere between lean and bulky with cut muscles, a trim waist and strong legs. He also looks close to my age, maybe a two or three years older.

"You know I can feel you staring at me," he calls out, and I flush red from head to toe. Does he have eyes on the back of his head?

"You're so full of yourself," I huff.

He chuckles lightly and turns around, leaning his hips against the counter. "Then why are you beet red?" He raises his left eyebrow with amusement bright in his eyes.

"It's from cold," I lie and dare him to challenge me.

"Then maybe you should have picked somewhere else for vacationing," he taunts.

"I have my reasons, and none of them have anything to do with sightseeing," I blurt out and realize my mistake. I don't know why, but I don't want him pitying me. This is why I avoid talking to strangers. It makes me nervous, and I end up telling more than I should, which leads to me overthinking. He goes quiet and serious, staring into me as if he wants to learn all my secrets. Hating being vulnerable and wanting to get back on even ground, I throw back at him, "And something tells me you aren't either."

He straightens, and his already dark eyes turn icy, his hands turning into fists at his sides. I know I hit a mark. He deserves it. I expect him to deny it or maybe lash out, but he completely surprises me.

"Then it's best we stay out of each other's ways."

Throwing his unfinished dinner in the dustbin, he walks down the hallway and leaves me alone. I realize I can't handle this back and forth and the emotions he brings out in me. He needs to go, because I can't live with a man who brings my vulnerabilities to the surface like an open wound without even realizing. Something deep inside me tells me that we might end up destroying each other in the worst way possible.

I wake up early the next day with the morning light streaming in my room through the floor-to-ceiling window. It feels like I'm floating high in the sky, right up there with the clouds and never to come back down.

After finishing dinner last night, I came to my room and plotted how to get rid of Arav. He gives off this broody vibe and everything about him is alpha, which tells me he must hate being pushed and his privacy stolen. I figure if I annoy him enough or make it impossible for him to share the cabin, maybe he will get tired of me—at least enough to run away from here. I just need to find his weakness

and use it to my advantage. All of this makes me giddy with anticipation and something to look forward to. A feeling I have been missing lately. I know it's all very childish, but I don't really have any other option.

Rising out of the bed, I make my way to the closet and pull out my workout clothes to change into and walk to the bathroom down the hall. It doesn't take me long to freshen up, and I feel energized to do yoga today with the amazing view in front of me. Yoga has helped me a lot with my anxiety ever since I started doing it last year when it was getting hard for me to get out of bed. I had put on a little weight, which made me feel the fattest girl in the world—especially when everyone around me started pointing it out. It only made me more depressed, but I have come a long way since then.

Pushing those dark thoughts out of my mind, I connect my iPhone to the Bluetooth speaker and play my favorite workout playlist with the volume loud. Then, I lay down my mat and begin with simple stretching exercises. After few minutes, I lie down on my stomach and go into plank and hold my stance for at least two minutes. Next, I do sideways plank, which is not as easy as it looks. I close my eyes and easily get lost in my head and my body relaxes, a feeling of euphoria taking over. Deep breaths in and out, then I move on to the next pose until my muscles start to burn, reminding me how far I have come. In between, I take a break for 10 to 20 seconds, then I stand up to get into downward dog position. As I bend over, I shriek in surprise, seeing Arav standing in my doorway, his lips in a scowl and sparkling green eyes glued to my ass.

Straightening up, I turn around to glare at him for disturbing my morning routine, and before our gazes can clash, his eyes pause on my breasts, which are heaving because of my fast breathing. But the way my nipples have turned into hard points and push against my bra is all because of his presence, and I hate it. Finally, he looks at my face, and I wonder how long he was staring at me like a creep.

“What do you want?” My voice comes out raspy.

I cross my arms and wait for his response. Instead he takes a step towards me, and instinctively I take one back. His walk is more like a prowl, measured and controlled. His messy hair tells me he just woke up, and I drool at the sight of his prominent muscles under his thin shirt and low riding sweatpants. My heartbeat calms down when he walks past me to the Bluetooth speaker and turns it off. It puts me into action.

“Why the hell did you turn it off?” I demand.

“Are you trying to wake up the whole fucking neighborhood?” he growls. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

“It's seven in the morning!” I screech. “And there's no other cabin beside ours.”

“Well, I'm not a morning person. Which means no music this early.” he orders and leisurely saunters out of my room. Like hell he can. I follow him, and just before his door slams shut, I push it back open and walk inside his room just like he barged into mine. His naked back greets me as he's

getting ready to get back into bed, but I don't let it distract me. *Barely.*

“You can't bark orders at me and walk out.”

“I just did, princess.”

He doesn't even bother to turn around, which pisses me off further. The arrogance of this man. He shifts and sits against the headboard and smirks at me. His room is an exact replica of mine, but the floor-to-ceiling glass leads to a balcony.

“I'm going to play my music as loud as I want, and there's nothing you can do about it.”

I turn around to leave, but his low and deep voice stops me.

“Do it and see what happens,” he threatens in a dark tone, and my body heats up as if he whispered something sweet in my ear.

“Oh yeah,” I taunt. “What the hell are you going to do?”

His eyes spark at the sass in my voice while his lips lose the smirk, and I watch his handsome face turn serious. Ever so slowly, his teeth bite the corner of his lower lip, which is slightly fuller than the top, and I know they'll feel soft caressing my skin, capable of both pleasure and pain. A shiver goes down my spine when he shamefully lowers his gaze from my face, to my chest, down to my legs, and finally come back to my flushed face.

He threatens darkly, “For your sake princess, you better hope you never find out.”

Giving me another heated look full of wicked promises, he lies back on his bed and closes his eyes, dismissing me while I stand stunned, pissed, and a little turned on. His bossy attitude only strengthens my resolve that he needs to go, and now I know just how to do it. I'll show him he's got another thing coming if he expects me to blindly obey.

“Go back to your room, Maira. Unless you plan to glare at me all day long,” he says with his eyes closed, and it takes everything in me not to show him the finger.

I am so going to enjoy making his life hell. Especially his mornings. I'm not scared of his empty threats.

Let the games begin.

CHAPTER 4

ARAV

Fucking hell.

This woman is going to get the spanking of her life if she doesn't stop ruining my mornings. She's a brat, plain and simple. Every day is the same: she wakes up at the crack of dawn and plays her loud-ass music while bending in positions meant to give any red-blooded man a hard-on. My mind conjures all the ways I could have her beneath me, fucked and spent. I probably would, if I didn't want to strangle her half the time. Since the first morning I confronted her, the image of her stretched and bent over has been stuck vividly in my head. I couldn't take my eyes off her heart-shaped ass, those slim legs, and her perfect breasts, shaking with every move she made and each breath she took. The sexy sight of her made me stand there, staring at her while she had no clue.

I have dated many beautiful women, but no one has had the same effect as her. She's stunning, but there's also a fire inside her that calls to me. Every time she gives me sass, it makes me wanna push her harder. I thought I was dead inside yet she excites me, challenges me, and that's exactly what she's been doing these past few days. I can tell she's up to something, because she's been going out of her way to push me. It's these little things like playing the goddamn music, hogging the bathroom until all the hot water is gone, filling the whole fridge with her veggies and fruits... and yesterday, she went as far as to leave my balcony doors open so that when I came back from outside, my room was chilled to the bone.

I have been trying my best to ignore her and not call her out on her antics, because our close proximity is getting to me while all I want is to be left alone. I thought I scared her enough when I threatened her, but she's tougher than she looks. Instead of making her submit, it has somehow had the opposite effect. The only reason she believes she has the upper hand is because I haven't done anything to stop it. It's time to show her who's in charge here. And if games are what she wants to play, then it will be by my rules.

I give up on sleeping when I still hear the sounds coming from her room and instead decide to shower and start my day. Walking inside the bathroom, I get naked and stand under the spray of hot water. I close my eyes, and my mind goes back to my past.

It's eerily quiet and the lights are turned off when I close the door to the apartment I share with my fiancée, Ria, whom I've dated for the past two years. I know she's home, because she texted me after her classes were done and asked me not to bring dinner. I met her on the first day of college when she was a freshman and I was a junior. It was love at first sight. She was so

stunning with her curly hair, black eyes, and a smile as bright as the sun shining down on her while all I could do was stare. Finally, when our gaze met, I knew I had to make this girl mine. After three months of pursuing her, she said yes to dating me—and the rest is history.

Throwing my keys on the counter next to me, I walk down the hall where I can see the glow coming from the dining room, and I stop in my tracks at the sight of a candlelit table and the delicious aroma of food which I can tell she cooked. My mouth waters not at the food but at the sight of Ria, staring at me under her hooded eyes and a teasing, almost shy smile on her pink lips. She looks sexy, wearing one of my shirts, and her favorite denim shorts that curve over her ass enticingly. She knows exactly what it does to me when she wears my clothes, immediately turning me on, but I can tell she's got something else on her mind tonight.

“Babe, our anniversary isn't until next month,” I tease while gesturing to the room.

“I know. Doesn't mean I can't still cook for my man.” She saunters over to me and pulls at my tie to give me a kiss. Unable to resist, I push my hands in her curls and tilt her mouth so I kiss her the way I like, and she lets me.

Pulling away reluctantly, I whisper against her lips, “If you keep this up, I'll end up eating you as my dessert.”

“As much as I would enjoy that, I need to tell you something. But first, let's eat. I made your favorite.”

I wonder what she could possibly tell me, but I don't push her, knowing it will be futile. Besides, I can be patient. As long as she's happy, I don't care what it is. Sitting down opposite her, we serve the food and begin eating, and the flavors melt on my mouth. “If I didn't love you already, your cooking skills alone would make me.” I wink at her, and her laugh flows across the table.

“So I guess it's true. The way to a man's heart is through delicious food.”

“Don't forget great sex,” I add with a grin, to which she shakes her head, amused. Once we have finished off our plates, we take our desserts to the couch in the living room and I put her legs over my knees, so she's cozy in my arms.

“Tell me why I deserved such a pleasant surprise tonight?” I stroke her arm while staring down at her. All of sudden, she goes still and takes a deep breath, making my heart race. “You know you can tell me anything, right?” I reassure her.

“I'm pregnant.”

Hearing those words, I go still, unable to believe it. Mistaking my silence, she straightens in my arms and mumbles, “I know we didn't plan it and that we were going to wait until we settled... but when I saw those two lines on the stick... after the initial panic, I felt so happy. The thought of having your baby makes me feel like the luckiest girl in the world, Arav. I get we are young but...”

Before she can utter another word, I slant my mouth over hers and kiss her like my life depends on it. I kiss her until she's moaning and breathless in my arms. Pulling away, I make sure she sees the excitement and happiness on my face. "Sweetheart, I don't care if it's the right time or not. I love you, and I can't wait to raise our baby together." I swipe the tear rolling down her cheek.

"So you're not mad?" she asks timidly.

"Are you kidding me? Having a kid is a blessing, one I'm going to cherish every day for the rest of our lives." Then I seal our lips together until there's no doubt in her mind.

I'm pulled out of the ghosts of my past when the bathroom door behind me bursts open, and when I turn around, an embarrassed and blushing Maira greets me, big brown eyes staring right at my half-hard cock. I clear my throat, and as if this is the first time she's seen a naked man, she slaps her hands over her face and turns the other way.

"Don't you know how to lock the door?" she shouts, but I hear the slight tremble in her soft voice.

"Couldn't you hear the water running?" I toss back at her.

She reacts just like I expected. Like an angry little bird, she whirls around and points her finger at me while avoiding looking below my waist. Unlike her, I don't shy away from checking her out, especially knowing how much it annoys her. And also because it shuts up her mouth. Today, she's wearing only a tight sports bra with her toned stomach on display and black leggings which are molded to her long legs and curve sexily over her ass. Her hair is knotted high in a ponytail, and it puts her beautiful face on full display.

"Stop checking me out, you asshole. Don't you have any decency?" she says in annoyance.

"Just a second ago, you were staring at my dick. And still you're standing here, talking to me. Decency went right out of the window, princess."

"I didn't know you were taking a shower."

Unable to resist pushing her, I walk towards her. "What are you doing?" Her voice stutters and she tries taking a step back. Instead, her back clashes against the counter and she swallows nervously. I don't stop until I'm standing right in front of her and rest my hands on her sides, easily cornering her until our breaths mingle. I don't understand what it is about her that makes me gravitate towards her. The fight in her, how she never backs down, even scared or shyly biting her lip like right now... all of it makes me want to bend her to my will. She brings out the playful side of me I thought I had lost, the old me who looked at the world with light and not the cruel hell it is. She makes me feel... alive. Like I can finally breathe. And I hate it. So before she can tame the darkness in me, I would rather break her first.

"Taunting you just like you have been doing these past days. Not so funny now, is it?" I tsk.

“Wha... What are you talking about?” she whispers, her gaze glued to the water dripping down my abs.

“Don’t act so innocent, Maira. I told you what would happen if you didn’t obey me,” I remind her.

“I don’t listen to you,” she challenges.

“You like to play games, don’t you? You think you can push me and I won’t do anything about it.”

“I... I don’t know. You’re making it up in your head.”

She tries to push me back, but I grip her waist and she stills. Slowly, I run the back of my fingers against her belly and lean down to whisper in her ear. “So you don’t purposely use all the hot water?” She shakes her head no and I continue teasing her, my fingers inching lower. “So it wasn’t you who left my balcony doors open yesterday?” Again she shakes her head no, and in return, I pinch her skin lightly. When she moans, my already hard cock twitches, and before I end up fucking her, I let go and step back.

Her eyes are hooded while she bites her lip, and I notice her skin is red where I pinched her, which gives me fucked-up satisfaction that my mark is on her. This is the first time I have rendered her speechless, but I know it won’t stay that way for long. Once the shock wears off, her sass will come back, and I’m already looking forward to it, even though I shouldn’t. Even though there are other important things I need to do rather than spar with her.

Snatching my towel from the hanger, I wrap it around my waist, covering my hard-on before she can look, and I warn her, my voice cold and hard. “Remember this before you try to push me again. Trust me, you can’t handle my games.”

Walking by her, I give her a taste of her own medicine.

“Oh, and princess? There’s no hot water left.”

A second later, I hear the slamming of the door. I can’t wait to see what she does next.

CHAPTER 5

MAIRA

I lean back against the bathroom door and try to calm my racing heart and the throb between my thighs while fighting the urge to follow him and demand him to finish what he started. The sight of his naked body is seared in my mind. The sinewy muscles, hard chest, those chiseled abs and a well-hung cock between his strong thighs. No wonder his ego is huge. The man is utter perfection, and if I close my eyes, I can still feel the heat of his body, the water dripping down his abdomen to the press of his dick, throbbing and pushing against my stomach. It's a miracle I didn't combust into flames when his calloused fingers traced a tortuous path against my stomach, caressing softly one minute and then pinching hard the next second.

Fuck. I can't get caught up in him, because if I do, he'll ruin me, destroy what is left of me while leaving me to pick up the pieces. Why did I think messing with him was the best idea? All he had to do was touch to turn me into a stuttering and quivering mess, only capable of nodding and moaning. He was so smug when he sauntered out of here, and the asshole didn't even leave any hot water. *You know you had it coming.*

Stepping towards the mirror, I pull my hair into a knot at the top of my head and ignore the color in my cheeks. My eyes wander over to the mark left by his hands on my skin. I can't believe I let him get close to me and didn't even push him away. It's disconcerting that my first instinct was arousal and not fear. As if my body had a mind of its own to his closeness, his intoxicating scent and his hardness. The thought of any man pushing my boundaries this way makes me see red, but when he did it, it felt... freeing and heady. Some part of me must trust him on some subconscious level. Is it because there's a pull between us, or because of the sadness in him calls to mine? It's all so confusing.

Frustrated at the situation I'm stuck in, I push back all thoughts of him and decide a little distance from Arav is what I need. Maybe a trip to the town I saw on the journey is the best way to accomplish it. I promised myself I would make effort on this vacation, push my limits—and not in a let-a-man-corner-me-alone kind of way. Settling on that, I finish the rest of my shower super quickly until the rough start to my morning is forgotten. Changing into my jeans and an off-the-shoulder sweater, I step downstairs to the kitchen for breakfast. I decide on an omelet and a hot cup of coffee.

I'm busy setting my plate when I hear a rumbling sound coming from outside. It's similar to that of a bike but rougher and louder. Tip-toeing to the window in the living room, I slowly pull aside the curtain to peek at who is making all this noise. I'm surprised to see it's none other than Arav himself, straddling a motorcycle similar to a Harley but just as sleek and shiny, complementing his

bad-boy persona. He looks so hot and sexy with messy hair pushed back, showing every angle of his face, and a leather jacket stretched tight over his thick arms paired with dark denim jeans. My mouth waters at the confident way he's handling and pushing on the throttle. How come I missed it when I came here a week ago? And isn't it dangerous to ride it on the narrow mountains? Again, why do I care? He's rude and arrogant.

I'm unable to tear my eyes away from him, even when he senses I'm staring and twists his head to catch my gaze, shivers dancing down my spine at his unforgiving attention. He doesn't smile or wink when I'm caught under his forest-green eyes, yet he still manages to make my panties damp, an ache pulsing in my clit. There's not even a hint of the smirk he usually sports, only iciness and clenching of his jaw. Every cell in my body says to step back, but my feet are rooted to the spot as if in a trance or a battle to see who first looks away. Just because he got the last word earlier, doesn't mean he's won. Finally, he throttles the bike one more time and drives off, leaving smoke of dust in his wake. And even though it was him who backed away first, it still feels like I lost.

I'm tucked away in a corner booth at the back of the small café I found on my way to the lively town. It wasn't far so I chose to walk and enjoy all the scenery. Even with my sweater and coat, the cold seeps inside, making me shiver slightly with fog coming out of my mouth, but it's worth it. Manali is one of those places everyone wishes to visit at least once in their life and explore the nature, the beauty, the culture and picturesque sights. I plan to visit and experience it all before my time here is over and I need to get back to my boring as well as predictable life. I'm at a point where I need to make a decision in which direction I want to go next. I want to be bold and live on my own terms, no matter the consequences.

When I told my parents I wanted to spend my summer here, they yelled and told me I'm wasting my time and that my path is already set for me. They expect me to follow in their footsteps and choose a demanding career like a lawyer, to spend these few months preparing and devoting all my energy for the LSAT. They don't get give a fuck about my opinion or dream to study literature, one thing that makes me happy. I'm like that girl who begged her father to let her go on a trip to Europe in that movie, and once she came back, she'd marry the guy her dad chose for her. Ironic that I actually loved that movie... only to be found living my own version of it.

I'm pulled out of my depressing thoughts when I hear a girl laugh loudly to whatever the guy behind the counter whispers to her, and everyone's attention goes to her. I can only see the back of her with hair down to her waist and wearing a deep burgundy sweater, a size too big for her small frame. When she turns around, she looks about my age, but her personality is the complete opposite of me. She's so pretty with a round face, cat-like eyes, pert nose, and lips in a small grin. I can never fathom how easy it comes to certain people to not shy away, making small talk with strangers or not caring what others are thinking about them, if they're judging you or pointing out your flaws. How freeing it must be to just be yourself. Be confident in your own skin. I, on the other hand, am conscious of every move I make. I'm not ashamed to admit I'm envious of her right now.

As if she can hear my thoughts telepathically, she suddenly turns around and looks straight at me, and I watch a small smile steal her lips. I can't help but give a nervous smile in return, the kind

you give to a stranger who is being polite. She surprises me yet again when she abandons the guy and strides towards me, a cup of coffee in her hands. I shove the book I was reading closed when she's closer.

"Hey, whatcha reading?" Without waiting for my permission and totally unruffled, she plonks down across from me in my booth while taking a small sip of her hot coffee, the aroma enticing me to order one as well.

"Just my favorite romance novel." I don't know what makes me answer her honestly. Maybe it's the genuine smile on her face or the curiosity shining in her gaze.

"Oohh... is it Chetan Bhagat?" she guesses.

"I wouldn't call his books romantic."

"Wait... it's Durjoy Dutta. Am I right?" Her face lights up as though she's correct. Don't people realize there could be other authors out there, and way better than the two she mentioned? It's like most Indians don't know that these two aren't the only ones. I mean, they're good, but my tastes run a little on the edgy and dark side. I'm almost disappointed to tell her she's wrong.

"Sorry to crush your hopes, but no."

"What! Who is it then?" she exclaims, flabbergasted, her coffee forgotten.

The comical look on her face brings a chuckle out of me. Emboldened by the fact that this might be the only time we'll talk, I decide to tell her the kind of romance I read. I just hope she isn't scarred or wonders what could be wrong with me.

"I'll tell you if you promise not to judge," I lean over the table to whisper, and she mimics me.

"Pinky promise." She grins.

"The kind of romance I read edges more towards the dark and erotic side. One where the line between right and wrong is blurry." Leaning back, I speak in my normal voice. "Right now, I'm reading *Sweet Depravity* by Zoe Blake. Her Russian men are my kryptonite." I wink.

"See, I knew you would be fun. At least I got something right."

"Guess you did." Now I feel bad for being jealous of her. She's sweet and candid. No wonder people drift towards her. Only a few minutes and she's managed to break my rule of not conversing with strangers.

"Oh, I just realized I didn't tell you my name. I'm Sasha, and you?"

"Maira."

"Pretty name. So what brings you here? Alone or with someone?" she asks curiously.

“Alone. Just wanted to get away for a while.”

“Makes two of us. I spend my summer here every year. My grandparents used to live here so I always came to visit them, and even after they passed away, something keeps bringing me back. If you want, I could show you around. Sounds like you could use a friend,” she finishes with a grin.

My first instinct is to say no—but didn't I say I want to take risks and explore? Otherwise how can I expect to come out of my shell if not by meeting new people, and Sasha's offer is kind. She's genuine and funny. Someone I could be friends with.

“I would love that.”

She claps her hands together in excitement, and this time it's her leaning towards me with a glint in her eyes, so I do the same.

“I'm going to show you the wild and dark side of this town. There won't be Russian men, but you'll have the best time of your life. Once you leave, Manali will have left a mark on your soul.”

CHAPTER 6

ARAV

Never let my hopes up.

This is the motto I have been living by for the past year, and it's the only way I can stay sane and not lose the thin hold I have on my nightmare-filled life. Avenging my son's death is the sole purpose of my existence. Everyone believes it was a simple accident. A mistake. An act of lunacy. But I know it for what it was.... a cold-blooded murder. It is said that the need for revenge only feeds the fire inside you for the sweet taste of victory at the end, for righting the wrong, but never the peace you're aching for nor the healing of your wounds. The only way to have that is to let go. To move on. Though the glaring and bitter truth is that it's easier said than done.

They don't know how sometimes this selfish need is the only tether that keeps you going on. How it's the only need keeping you from falling apart, from losing your battles with the demons residing inside you. The balm to the helplessness you felt when the tragedy struck. The false sense of control you desperately seek. So yes, it may never give me the peace, never give me redemption, but at least I'll know the person who killed my son paid the price in their blood. I'll know I kept the vow I made to him on his ashes when we finally meet again beyond this world.

A week after the small funeral, I finally decided to hire a private investigator to help me in my hunt to find her. Fortunately, money has never been an issue for me, so I didn't shy away from hiring the best in the market. We didn't have much to go on, and every time we thought we got closer, she would either escape or it was a dead-end. The anger in my veins and my motto were the only things that got me this far. My trip here wasn't some unintentional or spur-of-the-moment decision. My PI told me he had a lead he was looking into and asked me to come here. When I asked if she was hiding here, he said he can't say for sure until he's got solid confirmation, but it's definitely the strongest lead we've had in a while. So without wasting any time, I packed my bags and came here on the first flight. Today, I got a text from him.

Zenith PI: Meet me at the Manali Nature Park at 10 sharp.

The timing was perfect, because Maira had already disrupted any chance of sleeping, and after our little confrontation—or more like lust—clouding my actions, I needed some distance from her tempting body and equally sassy mouth to get my head on straight. No woman has ever gotten to me like she does, not even my ex-fiancée. Whenever I'm with her, she makes me forget the wreckage of my life. My need for vengeance is the last thing on my mind and the constant rage that simmers beneath my skin. I can't let her distract me from my path. Maybe I should make this another motto.

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