



AUCTIONED SURRENDER

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VIA MARI

Auctioned Surrender

Sinful Duet

Book 2

Via Mari

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Auctioned

Via Mari

To my husband.

*Thank you for always believing in me, supporting my passions, and helping
me make all my dreams come true.*

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Chapter 1

Damian

I walk out of the upscale high-rise which houses one of the most exclusive restaurants in Chicago and slide into the back seat of the sleek black limo. It's one of the many perks for being top security to the billionaires we protect.

Evers, one of the team drivers, knows exactly where I'm going without me saying a word. Home, alone, just like every night; unless, of course, the mood strikes to let off a little steam at the local BDSM club, but that's the last thing on my mind tonight.

Evers is winding his way slowly through the brightly lit streets and congestion of Chicago when my cell dings with an incoming message. The beautiful young woman who I've been looking for, have had numerous members of our intel team working round the clock to find, is staring at me through the screen with a wide set of brilliantly colored green eyes.

Bryanna Foster, Jenny Torzial's niece. The one who's been an enigma, the one I've been assigned to find by Brian Carrington, one of the richest men in the world and Jenny's extremely protective boyfriend. The niece that is now sitting on the lap of a man old enough to be her goddamn father, sliding around his groin as he places money in her skimpy little showgirl top, which looks like any minute it's going to slip right the fuck off.

After the picture arrives, the security team sends an address. Un-fucking-believable! She's still in the city, but the address of the bar this picture was taken from is at least an hour or so away with traffic. I give Evers the location, and he quickly flips directions at the next intersection, and we begin making our way to the other side of Chicago.

When Bryanna first went missing, almost three weeks ago to the day, Brian asked me to find her, and every single lead we got came up empty.

Jenny described her niece as smart, shy, and a hard worker. She was in her last year of college, living in Jenny's rental house close to the university campus, when she disappeared.

I was beginning to think we were never going to find her, and here she is, right under our damn noses. I shake my head, glancing at the picture on my phone. She definitely doesn't look like the innocent I thought she was; that's for goddamn sure. I'm relieved we found her, but a part of me is irritated that I spent so much emotional energy worrying about her when she doesn't look like she has a fucking care in the world.

Intel sends message after message, and ten minutes later I have an entire photo album filled with images of this little seductress. The one I'm apparently supposed to save from herself. In one of the next pictures, Bryanna is sitting on a different man's lap. I let my gaze travel down the length of her unclothed spine, taking in the lacy material of her thong-decorated ass cheeks, unable to help admiring her sleek fitness and form.

I haven't been able to get this woman off my mind for weeks, and the next picture they send leaves me absolutely riveted. Bryanna's dark brown shoulder-length hair is wispy and swirls around her. Her long bangs frame her heart-shaped face, showing off those incredibly large doll-like green eyes, the very ones that seem to burn right through the camera and straight into my own, making it almost impossible to look away.

When we reach the club, I tell Evers to wait for me in the car. I should have followed protocol and called for back-up, but I don't want anyone else to see Jenny's half-naked niece in this sordid little club. I'm also fairly certain that Brian's not going to want any of this leaking to the public.

I walk up to the small building and stop at the door to pay, waiting for the man to ask me for a form of identification, but that never comes. Clearly it doesn't matter how old you are as long as you pay the fucking cover. I peel off a ten, hand it to the burly dude at the door, and he marks my hand with some cheap-ass stamp, allowing me to enter the seedy little joint.

I scan the relatively small and dimly lit bar for Bryanna. A tall blonde is on a semi-circular stage, dressed only in a lacy white g-string, and the men around the bar are hooting and hollering, encouraging her to take it all off, but the woman I'm looking for is absolutely nowhere to be seen.

I slowly head for the back, checking nonchalantly to make sure I'm not being observed, before slipping through the door, down a small hallway, and toward the sound of women's laughter. I turn the corner, and the door's wide

open. It's immediately clear I've unintentionally entered the establishment's high-end dressing room, with one mirror, a little sink, a few metal lockers hung on the dirty yellowing walls, and a line of ladies in various states of dress.

A tall brunette dressed in a pair of red lace panties with matching pasties plastered to her breasts and red spike heels bats her stark-black fake eyelashes at me as I survey the room. "Well, well, handsome. Did you come for a private show?"

"I'm looking for a friend."

"You need to get out of here before someone comes back here and finds you."

"I'm not leaving without the lady," I say, walking toward the half-naked broad. As I get closer and the light shines down on her face, it would take a blind man not to notice the fading bruises just underneath her eye and the caked-on makeup she wears, intending to cover it up.

She physically cringes as I get close, so I step back, not wanting to frighten her further. "I'm not here to cause trouble, just looking for the girl."

"Mister, you better leave now, or all hell's going to break loose for you and for us. Get the fuck out! Our lives are tough enough," the brunette says, and all the ladies nod in agreement.

I'm empathetic to their situation, but I came for a reason, and I haven't found her yet. I approach the ladies with gentle ease, slowly showing them the picture on my phone. "Anyone know her? If so, I'll make it worth your while."

"How much you talking, papi?" a beautiful woman with dark, wavy, lush hair, wearing only a pair of red spike high heels and the same color smile asks.

I don't get a chance to tell her before the blonde next to her elbows the woman in the arm. "You take that money, and we're all going to pay for it, Layla." The blonde woman glares at me through bloodshot eyes. "Get the fuck out!" she says.

I pull out a roll of bills and start counting them off—one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred. When I reach five, the one they call Layla steps forward. "They're right. Get out! We can't have any trouble!" she says, glancing fleetingly upward.

I follow her gaze, but just briefly. The sons of bitches have a camera on the girls, and I can't tell if Layla is looking to them for help or trying to warn

me that they exist. “I’ll go. I just thought someone might have seen her. Clearly I’ve come to the wrong place,” I say, deciding to slip out before someone comes to physically remove me.

I steal down the hall and have just ducked behind a closed door midway when a barrage of boots passes me, making their way toward the dressing room.

This is turning out to be more than a crappy night. I slip back down another hall and make my way out the side door of the establishment, walking a good half mile before sending a text to Evers with my location and instructions to pick me up. He pulls into a little area partly secluded by hedges, and I jump into the back seat after checking to make sure there are no signs of anyone trailing me.

“Let me see if I can get another car and do a little recon,” I say to Evers, who just nods. I text Keith, one of our security team who is always in the city when not helping to protect Jenny and Brian, to see if he can get a Q car sent to our destination as quick as possible.

He responds, letting us know he has a friend a few blocks away with an average looking car that was just completely overhauled and modified with an amazing engine and lots of power under the hood.

I then text Matt, who protects Jenny much of the time, to tell him we have a lead on her niece. He responds, offering his help since he and Marenah are still in the city and staying at his hotel, but I’m good for now, and let him know that I’ll call if help is needed and to go have fun with his fiancée.

Roger that!

I smile, happy my friend has found someone he cares about.

I’m skimming intel messages when a dark blue Honda drives up and brakes hard in front of us. The right rear bumper is caved in, but the lights work great, and it’s exactly the kind of vehicle that will blend in wherever we need to go on this side of town. “Stay here and keep the lines open. I’ll let you know if I need backup, or anything else,” I say to Evers, who just grunts as I hop out of the stretch.

The young friend of Keith’s walks up to me and hands me a set of keys. “I’m Garrett. Keith said you’d be in a hurry. I can stay here until you get back,” he says.

I open the limo door for Garrett to jump in. “Hang out with Evers until I return. I’m sure the two of you will have fun,” I say, winning me a glare from

one of the grumpiest drivers I've ever had the personal experience to know.

I head to Keith's car and veer toward my destination. When I'm near the little dive bar, I turn off my headlights and inch my way forward, guided only by distant illumination cast over an otherwise pitch-black lot. I park in the back, facing the entrance so I can watch who comes and goes. It's almost three hours later, after the majority of patrons have left, that a few of the lights go off in the back of the bar.

A couple women come out with men who escort them to different vehicles. A few I recognize from the bar, and they're surrounded by shady looking fuckers who put them into the back seat of an old beat-up Cadillac, but none of them are who I'm looking for.

Layla, the dark-haired beauty who was more than willing to take my money, doesn't come out until all the lights go off, and when she does, it's with the arm of a tall bald guy wrapped around her. He walks her to a vehicle and roughly draws her in for a kiss while grabbing a handful of ass.

I picture her turning around and slugging the slime bag, but she doesn't do anything of the kind, just accepts his handling of her until he walks away and gets into the silver Porsche parked in the farthest corner of the lot.

By the looks of that car, I might have just found the ringleader and his main squeeze. Maybe I can convince Layla to tell me where Bryanna is and sell this guy's no-good ass down the river at the same time.

I text Evers with the description of Layla's blue souped-up Camaro and tell him to follow her once she hits the main road. I wait a decent amount of time before heading out of the parking lot and onto one of the side streets. It takes all of five minutes before he texts me with their coordinates. He turns off to avoid getting noticed, and I take his place.

I pull up near Layla's apartment building and slide into a parking lot across the way, observing as she climbs the steps of a building with six units, three on each floor, and enters the one on the end. I've seen a lot of dumps in my day, but this complex looks like it may just collapse at any moment. I check my Glock and make my way to her apartment, listening closely at the door before trying the knob. It's not locked. I open the door as quietly as I can, taking in the little box television from the nineties sitting on top of an overturned cardboard box, and a faded plaid couch across the room.

It takes less than six steps to make my way across the minimal living space and to the door that must be the bathroom. I knock, intending to wait for her to come out, but instead she tells me to come in.

I turn the knob slowly and walk through the door, fully expecting to surprise Layla; instead, the wispy-haired brunette with deep green eyes that I've been searching for is leaning against the back of the tub, concealed by white bubbles except for the very pink tips of her breasts, which are floating seductively along the surface.

Bryanna lowers herself in the water. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name's Damian. I'm here to take you home. Your mother, your aunt, and your entire family are worried that something terrible has happened to you."

She gazes up at me with those round doll-like green eyes, and then sticks her pink colored toenails out of the bubbles, placing them on the ledge, while taking me in from head to foot. "I don't have a family; unless, of course, you wanna be my daddy," she says, licking the bottom of her lip.

Chapter 2

Bryanna

When the tall dark-haired man in a black suit and crisp white shirt walks into the bathroom unannounced, I know he has to be the same one that Layla told me was fishing for information about me at the club. *Play it cool, just play it cool*, I chant silently, lowering myself in the water, suddenly extremely aware the tops of my breasts are floating on the bubbles that surround me. When I tell him I have no family, unless he wants to be my daddy, he raises his eyebrows at me, but doesn't leave as I expected he would. Instead, he places his hand on the door frame, making his six-foot-two-inch stature even larger and more intimidating.

“Interesting, I have a picture that looks exactly like you, from your aunt taken less than a few weeks ago,” he says, casting those deep blue eyes at me, seemingly in no hurry for me to acknowledge his comment.

I shrug, twirling my toe around the faucet, and his eyes track my movement. “I haven't the foggiest, but I do know that you need to leave before my boyfriend comes home. He's incredibly large and extremely jealous,” I say, gesturing to the doorway he's blocking with his tall, muscular frame.

His squared jaw locks and eyes narrow. “What would you like me to tell your aunt? Perhaps that you've decided to ditch your family, leave college and a nice home to live in this shithole and grind on old men for a measly couple of bucks?”

I've become accustomed to hearing such callousness in the last few weeks, but his words cut deep. Hell if I'll let him know that, though. I gesture toward the door with a nod of my head. “You've overstayed your welcome. Get out.”

He doesn't move, instead starts to say something, but Layla sidles up right behind him, and I hear the unmistakable click of her switchblade. "She told you to leave, papi. My boyfriend's going to be home in a few minutes, and if he finds you here, you're not going to live to tell about your little visit," she says.

I smile because as much shit as I've been through the last few weeks, Layla has become my best friend, my most staunch supporter, and always seems to have my back. She is a ball of fire when someone pisses her off, and she knows how to handle herself in a world that forces her to do just that. She is passionate about what she cares about and has been a godsend to me, even letting me stay with her, although the big boss who treats her like his own wasn't exactly thrilled about it.

"I'm not going to ask you again, papi."

"The name's Damian, and I'm leaving," the man says without so much as another word to me.

He turns, and Layla steps aside to let him head into the living room, hot on his trail to make sure he does exactly that. I hear them talking, and then after a short while, the door slams and the dead bolt slides into place.

When Layla returns, I act like this sort of thing happens every day, scolding her for not using the lock when she came home, but she's hardly interested. She's standing in the bathroom doorway, counting hundred-dollar bills. "You know that guy, because he's sure as hell not going away anytime soon; you know this, right, mami?" Layla says, pursing her plump red lips together.

"I can't control what other people do," I say, shrugging indifferently and sinking into the now tepid water to soak up the last bit of luxury I can provide myself with these days.

"Listen to me, Lacey girl, you're not like the rest of us. I told you; they have men coming to the States for the masquerade ball on Friday night. If they think you're hot, you won't have a chance in hell of escaping after that. I don't know a lot of the details, but you don't have much more time to make a run for it, mami. It's now or never," Layla says.

"It's never; I'll do whatever the men want. You and I aren't so different. Money talks, right?" I ask, smiling as wide as I can, anything to stop her line of questioning. I've done everything my captors have asked, haven't caused a bit of trouble, obeyed every order, but Layla isn't fooled by my act.

"Your fake smile doesn't do it for me, mami. I know better, si? I don't

know why, but I know better. Now, quit hogging all the hot water and get your ass out of here. It's already almost 3 a.m. I got off with a headache tonight, but R.J.'s gonna be horny in the morning," Layla says, pulling her shirt over her head, unclasping her bra, and leaving me no choice but to give up the tub. I reluctantly pull the plug, get out, and reach for a towel as she slides out of the little skirt she's wearing and steps into the bath, pulling the shower curtain closed and turning the water on.

I head into her bedroom, which is the only one in the apartment. I pull on a pair of panties and nightshirt from a drawer she's given me to use, head to the living room couch. I pull down the blanket that's lying over the top and snuggle into it, and for the first time since my captors took me, I allow the tears to fall and cry myself to sleep.

Chapter 3

Damian

The tip of the blade is pushed against my flesh. “I’m leaving.” I know instinctively it’s Layla, the dark-haired woman with flashy red lips who I followed home, and the same badass who is now wielding a knife to the middle of my back. I turn slowly, and she backs up, allowing me to walk past her and into the living room. I throw my business card on the couch, along with ten hundred -dollar bills. “I’ll triple that if you meet me alone at the park a few blocks from your work tomorrow.”

“No deal. Leave the money and get out of here before someone sees you,” Layla says, and her dark eyes dart toward the window and out into the darkness.

“Tomorrow, noon, come alone or bring the girl, but either way, we should talk. I’m trying to protect that girl,” I say to distract her, watching her contemplate while I drop a small microchip from my suit coat onto the seventies-style shag carpeting, before making my way out the door.

“Perhaps, papi,” Layla says.

I make my way out of the parking lot and back to where Evers is parked. I leave the Honda running and jump into the back seat with Garrett. He opens the door and is just about to get out, but I press five hundred-dollar bills into his hand. “Thanks for the loan of the car on such short notice.”

“No problem. You have any more work?”

He seems like a nice guy just trying to make a few bucks, and he’s a friend of Keith’s. “Listen, I don’t have anything for you right now, but give me your number. I’ll call if something comes up. Oh, and the car’s pulling a little to the right. You might want to get that taken care of first thing in the morning in case we need it again,” I say, pressing another thousand dollars

into his hands.

He doesn't even look at the amount of the money, just tells me his number while I put it in my phone, and then he heads toward his car. Evers pulls the limo back onto the road and is grumpier than normal. "That guy was ear-fucking me the whole goddamn time you were gone," he grumbles.

I have to suppress a chuckle because if Garrett said more than two words to Evers, that would constitute ear-fucking. If he's already grumpy now, things are sure to get interesting. "Evers, my friend, it's going to be a long-ass night."

"Come again, I thought we were done?" Evers says, and I text Keith to let him know that I'm going to need him or someone to back me up at noon tomorrow. I give him the address to the city park and tell him to remind Garrett to get that car of his fixed in case we need a few more men and a beat-up looking car in the near future.

"We're not done by a long shot," I say to Evers.

He glares at me in the rearview mirror but doesn't say a word.

I already know Layla will show up tomorrow. I thought at first she was going to sell Bryanna out at the club for a little cash, but something's not adding up. She's the boss's girl. She knew those cameras were on, where they were located, and knew exactly where to stand to ensure I wasn't captured on camera. I also know that when she had that knife to my back, she wasn't messing around, and she was prepared to protect her friend.

"I'm gonna stake out the apartment tonight, and until the others arrive you can be my backup," I say to Evers.

He doesn't say no, so I take that as a yes and pull out a bag equipped with everything I'll need from the side compartment of the limo. I shrug out of my jacket, unzip my pants and shift out of them before toeing off my shoes and pulling off my dress socks.

"You need a little strip tease music back there, Dame," Evers says, scowling at me in the rearview mirror.

Damn. Does that guy ever smile? If so, I seriously don't think I've ever seen it. "Not unless it turns you on," I say, earning me a growl as I shrug out of my white dress shirt, don the black t-shirt, a long-sleeve black shirt to go over it, and slide into my black camos. I bend to pull on some warm socks and lace my boots, take a quick inventory of my equipment, holster my weapons, pull out a small backpack, and then send a message to my backup.

"Stay here until Keith arrives. If anything goes sideways before he

arrives, get word to Matt. He's still in the city," I say.

"Roger that," Evers says.

I push out of the limo and make my way back to the apartment complex. The lights are still on, and no new cars have parked in the lot. I head toward a secluded row of bushes adjacent to the complex, get my binoculars out, and settle in for the night before sending a text to Matt.

Found Bryanna. She's alive and seems okay. Will know more tomorrow.

Roger that. Let me know if you need help.

Keith and I could use some backup at noon tomorrow.

I'm there. Whatever you need.

I text him with the park address and a list of things I'll need, open up the backpack and pull out a sheet of plastic, and lay it on the ground, along with a thin, rolled up sleeping blanket. Then I prepare to make myself as comfortable as possible and prepare for a long night, because I'm not taking my eyes or ears off Bryanna. The way she looked at me with those wide-set deep green eyes, lying right to my face while she was choking back her tears. This young lady is in some serious shit, and I intend to find out exactly what it is very soon.

The light in the bathroom goes out, and then I see a shadow of Bryanna in the living room, tossing a long blanket on what can only be the couch, and shortly after that, the entire apartment is cloaked in darkness. I put my headphones on and engage the microchip app on my phone. I've just gotten settled in when her soft crying begins, and it goes on for over an hour. Even after it stops, I can't shut the sound of it out of my mind. My jaw is clenched tight with the need to make whoever has hurt this lady pay dearly for that deed, and it takes almost two full hours of listening to her breathe before I know she's finally fallen asleep.

I imagine those wide, round deep green eyes looking at me as I listen to her, and my cock grows long and hard. Fuck, fantasizing about someone I'm protecting is something I don't do, shouldn't be doing, especially since she's Jenny's niece. Bryanna's young, six years my junior, perhaps not so bad in today's world, I guess, but still young. I try to shake the vision of her breasts bobbing amid the tub full of bubbles. Fuck, that was hot, and I'll probably never get that vision out of my head, and I hope to god I never do.

* * *

It hasn't even been four hours and the sun is barely up, just 7 a.m. by my watch. I observe Layla coming out of the apartment and heading down to the sporty little 1980s Camaro she drove home last night. It may be vintage, but that dark blue-and-white-striped little baby's got power, and Layla knows just how to handle it. She gives it a little gas, and it purrs as she peels out of the parking lot, and I send a message to Keith, who's a couple streets away, to get on her tail and stay there.

Roger that.

I smile. Keith was a great addition to the team. He doesn't like to leave Chicago now that he has a wife and an infant and another baby on the way, but there's more than enough work in the city, and he's proven himself highly valuable, time and time again. Jay and Matt have both found partners too. Brian Carrington and Chase Prestian, two of the wealthiest men in the world and biggest players around the globe, have each found someone special and settled down. I used to envision that for myself, but as my dad used to say, you have to live with the hand you're dealt, and long-term romances just aren't in my cards. It's a good reminder to make a trip to the club, blow off a little steam, and get my mind off this hot little green-eyed assignment.

It's another twenty minutes before Keith texts me with the address he's followed Layla to. I send it to intel to get an official confirmation of the occupant, but I already know exactly who it's going to be. The same sleazeball who owns that seedy little club, the one who had his hands all over Layla, and who more than likely has something to do with Bryanna's current situation.

I hear crackling in the brush and roll onto my stomach, my Glock at the ready. I recognize the shoes immediately and relax, smirking up at the man staring down at me. "Little touchy there, Dame? Thought you could use a break. How's Bryanna?" Matt asks.

"She's alive, but not so good emotionally. She's using a different name and denied that she was the person we're looking for. Looked right in my eye and lied and then cried herself to sleep. I haven't seen anything to confirm she's being held against her will, but you and I both know how these places work. Her friend Layla seems to be the best way to find out. She's the one I gave the cash to, the one I need to meet with, and the reason I asked you to

bring more money,” I say.

“Yep, I figured you’d want this before the meetup,” Matt says, handing me a roll of bills.

I glance at them and then back up to him. “This is a lot more than I asked for, or even than protocol allows for petty cash.”

“Brian wants Jenny’s niece back, and he’s willing to pay whatever it takes to get the job done.” He crouches next to me. “I talked to Dereck, and he said if we want to hang out and make sure we have eyes on Bryanna, he will meet with Layla. Keith said he planned on rounding up a couple of the guys to run backup. It’s up to you, but you look like shit. You’ve been killing yourself for weeks looking for this lady. I can’t imagine you want to let her out of your sight now.”

“Yeah, that would be great. Would you mind messaging Dereck and letting him know that sounds good to me. At first I thought Layla was going to turn Bryanna over to me for a few hundred bucks, but she was protecting her. She knew exactly where those cameras were placed in the room. Layla’s sleeping with the boss, so she may be privy to information that will help us figure out how this operation works. She didn’t agree to meet me, but I think she’ll come if it means helping Bryanna.”

“Roger that. I’ll get the information over to the guys, and you get some sleep. I don’t mind taking point for a little while,” Matt says.

“I’ll take you up on that too,” I say, stretching out. As tired as I am, my mind is unable to shut down and keeps running over image after image of Bryanna until I finally drift to sleep, and the little seductress follows me into my dreams.

Chapter 4

Bryanna

The morning sun is shining in through the cheap bent blinds. I walk the few steps from the couch to the kitchen, throw a filter and grounds into the coffee maker, and sling myself onto the barstool to scroll through last week's newspaper while I wait for my caffeine to brew.

The old flip phone which is never to leave my side vibrates on the counter. My captors only message me when they want me to do something, and then I do it without question. That's how this operation works. I pour a cup of coffee before the pot is half-finished, take a sip, and read the message.

You're off the clock today and tomorrow to get ready for the masquerade ball on Friday. Will send instructions later.

I read it again, and slowly digest the message and what it really means. I don't respond, because they never anticipate receiving, nor do they want a response. They expect you will do exactly as you've been told if you want to see your loved ones again. The choices are clear: you have none, except to do precisely as they instruct. I didn't really think at some point this nightmare would just suddenly disappear, or that they would give me back my life, or that somehow I would be spared, but Friday is only two days away, and the reality of what that means, especially after Layla's warning, is really starting to sink in.

Layla's Camaro woke me up. She must be on her way to R.J.'s, which means her bed is now available. I have the day off, so my caffeine fix is quickly forgotten in exchange for a few more hours of sleep. Her bed is mussed, the covers and sheets in disarray, but it still looks more inviting than the couch. I stretch out, enjoying the luxury because once Friday arrives, I

may never see the comforts of a bed, Layla, this apartment, or anyone who means anything to me again.

I pull Layla's pillow to me, soaking in a little comfort, wishing it was all a bad dream, but it is a reality, my own personal nightmare, and no one can save me, not even the man who thinks he can. My mind drifts to the tall handsome stranger who found me last night, Damian. I know exactly who he works for, and as long as that man is anywhere near me, my life is going to be a hell of a lot harder. I've heard about Brian's entire security team from my aunt and mother. They have a reputation for never giving up and always getting their man, but I don't believe in fairytales, or that Prince Charming will just come waltzing in and save the day.

I wake a few hours later feeling more refreshed and get ready for the day, applying the makeup I've been required to wear since taken: foundation to create an alluring and perfect complexion, blush to highlight my cheekbones, eyebrow pencil to accentuate the dramatic brows they created the last time they waxed me, and a fine eyeliner that doesn't smudge under the heaviest of lights for long hours of wear. I remember every single thing they've instructed me to do and finalize the look with a bright red lip liner, filling it in with the lipstick they've given me. I take a long look in the cheap glass mirror affixed to the backside of the door, and the face staring back at me looks so much older than it should. Twenty-two-years-old, no sexual experience to speak of, yet I'm supposed to be turning on men more than twice my age in clubs and venues all over the city.

I clean up the apartment and am just getting ready to fix lunch when the flip phone buzzes with another message.

Bee's Massage at 3 pm this aft. Driver will pick you up. Don't be late.

I crinkle my nose, because it's a humiliating experience to get your lady bits waxed, even if it does make you look perfect in the skimpiest of costumes. I pour another cup of coffee and put a bagel from the bakery down the street into the toaster. It may be days and days old, but with a little bit of heat and crisping, it will taste as good as new.

* * *

The clock strikes two-thirty in the afternoon, and the driver gives me a

warning beep letting me know he's right around the corner and not to make him wait. I race down the rickety stairs of our apartment complex and slide into the back seat of the sleek black Lincoln, the one they use to take me wherever they want me to go. These people may keep us living in dumps, with very little to eat, but as a sign of status, they make sure their ladies are seen riding in the fanciest of cars. It's my third time going to the salon, and each of the times before were scarier. I didn't know when or where they would come for me, but I know I'm safe today. I know that nothing is going to happen to me until Friday, thanks to the inside scoop from Layla.

When the long-blonde-haired receptionist gestures me to follow her to the back of the salon, I do as I'm told, averting my eyes and not saying a word. I already know the rules and what's on the agenda for today. The first waxing was embarrassing, but the second one went better, and it's not so bad, really. When we reach the spa, Ming, the mistress who resides over the parlor is waiting, and gestures me in like it's completely my choice to be here.

Ming holds out a glass filled with ice water and hands me a pill. "Take this; it will help you relax."

I'm to do as they say, when they say it, but I don't want to take anything that will affect my guard. "I'll be okay without anything, really," I say, hoping she'll concede.

Ming tsks at me and shakes her head. "I make the rules here, not you, my pet. Now be a good girl and swallow," the long, dark-haired esthetician in black high heels says, watching me do as she's instructed before closing the door. She turns to me.

"Strip for me, my pet," she instructs, sending a shiver of apprehension down my spine.

I inhale deeply, pulling on my dance and yoga training to help me center and calm myself. I know the drill and slide out of my stretchy black pants before slipping the form-fitting t-shirt over my head, taking time to fold both before placing them on the chair next to the table.

"We're wasting time, my pet," Ming says, tossing her hair and taking in my length as she marches toward me, her high heels clicking against the tile as she does.

I reach down to slide my panties off, but she tsks. "Bare your breasts first. I like the way they bounce when you're removing your panties," Ming says, her eyes capturing mine in challenge.

I swallow past the lump in my throat, find the clasp behind my back, and

slide my straps down the length of my arms before laying the bra on the pile of clothes. The third time should be easier, but the realization that this has really become my life seems to settle in with each command and humiliating order.

“Panties now; I want to inspect your pussy. I need to see how much work is needed to make you presentable for Friday night,” Ming says.

I slide my hands down my hips and grasp the sides of my panties, trying to hide the trembling and the sudden fuzziness I’m beginning to feel.

“Come, pet, hurry along. Nothing to be frightened of. I’ll take good care of you,” Ming coos, lowering her eyes to watch me as I remove the last bit of material from my body.

“See, that wasn’t so bad. Now, hands at your sides. I want to look at you,” she says, taking in my breasts and then lowering her blue orbs to between my legs.

She’s enjoying my humiliation, and something about that makes me summon a strength deep inside to hold back the flood of emotion, keeping it to myself so she can’t gain even one ounce of pleasure from my shame.

She pats the table, and her eyes warn me not to dawdle. I step onto the little stool to get on the table and lie down, knowing what will happen if I don’t, and nothing in the world is worth risking that. I have psyched myself up for her normal commands, the one where she tells me to butterfly my legs and press my heels together so she can inspect me for what she calls proper grooming. Instead, she walks to the side of the table and leans close enough that her lips are almost touching mine.

“We have so much time today. I’m going to teach you how to pleasure yourself while giving me a good show, my little sweet,” Ming croons, drizzling a warm vanilla-scented oil over my breasts and stomach.

“Rub it in, my pet. You’re going to provide the person who purchases you with a slow, erotic show, my little virgin. I will teach you what these men like, to ensure you don’t reflect poorly on my training skills,” Ming purrs.

The phone on the table next to us begins to buzz. She wipes the oil from her hands with a salon towel before answering. “I’m busy; what is so important?” Ming asks before her eyes narrow at the phone and then down at me. “She hasn’t even been waxed yet.” There’s a brief pause as she listens to the person on the other end of the line. “Fine, I’ll have her ready.”

She looks down at me and gives me a wicked smile. “Well, pet, it looks as though you and I will have to save playtime for later. Apparently a

gentleman who's looking for a little fun will be stopping in shortly. Be a good girl for him, and I'll reward you later," Ming says, not even bothering to wipe the oil from my skin, leaving me dazed and confused and at the mercy of whoever walks through that door.

Chapter 5

Damian

I rouse to a heavy hand pushing against my shoulder. “Hey, wake up, Dame. Limo just pulled up, and Bryanna’s on the move. I called for backup, and I’ll fill you in on Dereck’s meet with Layla on the way,” Matt says.

My eyes rapidly adjust to the sunlight. I nod, pushing up quickly, rolling my belongings just in time to watch Bryanna as she walks down those rickety fucking apartment steps. We hear the crunching of gravel as a sleek black Lincoln Continental makes its way up to the road and stops beside her. There’s a big burly guy in the driver’s seat, and as soon as Bryanna’s in the car, he wastes no time at all hitting the gas, which sends gravel flying clear across the parking lot.

I connect with our intel team and patch Evers into the call. “Follow that fucking car, and don’t lose it,” I say to Evers. “Matt has backup on the way,” I say to our intel group as we begin hiking toward the main road.

We’ve barely made it out of the woods when a supercar spins out in front of us, and the driver’s door swings up like a switchblade. Jay is grinning ear to ear in his brand spanking new Gemera, a luxury Swedish sports car and I couldn’t be happier to see him. I jump into the front seat, keeping my eyes glued on the tracker that’s following the chip in the limo Evers is driving, which will tell us exactly where he and the Lincoln he’s following are heading. Matt jumps into the back seat, the door swings closed, and Jay roars onto the highway.

“They’re about three miles ahead of us. Take the next right at the intersection,” I say.

“Roger that,” Jay says, accelerating the next couple miles before slowing for the right-hand turn. “Hang on,” he says, just barely making the light and

hugging the curve as we head north.

“Ease up, Jay. They’re not too far ahead of us. They’re taking the next left,” I say, and he slows and then stops at the intersection.

“We’re hung up at the light,” I say to Evers on the overhead.

“No worries. I’m right on their tail.”

As soon as the light turns green, Jay punches the gas. My eyes stay glued to the tracking app on my phone, the one that shows me right where Evers’ car is. “Hard right,” I yell, nearly missing the ninety-degree turn.

Jay’s car takes the corner. He floors the gas, and within a couple of minutes we can see the back end of the limo again. Jay eases up on the speed, staying a good distance behind this time so as not to draw attention to our car. Evers slows down and turns his blinker on to the left, but tells us on the overhead to go right. The man driving Bryanna has reached his destination, and Evers doesn’t want to get too close or arouse suspicion.

I google the surrounding businesses, and my jaw locks tight. There’s nothing but massage parlors, strip joints, a couple pawn shops, and a half-dozen stop-and-stab gas stations along this stretch of the thoroughfare. Bryanna may have acted like she wasn’t affected by her situation, but I saw the emotion swirling in her eyes, the will that she exuded not to breakdown and cry while she lied straight to my fucking face, and these surroundings make me want to find her fast.

Murphy from intel cuts through the silence in the car. “We have eyes on the parlor from above. The driver just hauled Bryanna into Bee’s Massage and Salon Parlor.”

Fuck! I know what they do in these joints, and while they may give some massages, a whole hell of a lot more than that goes on too. “Thanks, Murphy. I need a way in. You guys able to help a little?” I say as Jay pulls in just past the salon to park.

“Roger that, man. Dereck called in his update after his meeting with Layla. There’s a masquerade ball on Friday. They have an auction scheduled for virgins, and she said your little assignment is up for bid,” Murphy says.

My jaw clenches tight. “That’s our fucking way in then. Call in a request for a petite dark-haired innocent-looking babe with a body that won’t quit. Let them know your boss is traveling through, a little bored and willing to pay five thousand dollars for a little titty action and no sex, but it has to be now and with a virgin. If they want more specifics, just make something up,” I say to Murphy, who will call in my request to the parlor that we all know is

fronting for a brothel.

Murphy needs no further instruction. “We’ve got it covered.”

It’s less than ten minutes before we get a response. “They took the bait. You go in as Mr. Smith. Give it about ten minutes.”

“Are you serious? Everyone will know that’s a fake name,” I grumble.

“Of course. They would suspect anything else, and your name, Melotti ... well, it just reeks of trouble,” Murphy says.

I smirk, because it does, and he is so right.

“Roger that,” I say, preparing myself and switching clothes for the second time in less than twelve hours to put my eyes on this stunning and indescribably perfect woman.

I walk into the building, and a long-blonde-haired lady is sitting behind the counter. She must have heard the noisy clanging as I walked through the door, but doesn’t glance up until I clear my throat and ask her if this is Bee’s Massage Parlor.

The receptionist barely looks up even after that, gesturing to the large sign behind her that she apparently thinks I’ve missed. “I have an appointment. My name is Mr. Smith.”

She scours the list in front of her and nods as she apparently finds the match. “You have the luxury package. Come with me.” Her heels tap in front of me all the way down the hall until we reach a door at the end. “You have sixty minutes. We weren’t really expecting guests, so she may be a little drowsy, but I think you will still find her most accommodating. Poor thing must not have slept well, or lots of party-party last night.” She winks at me as I step into the small room, and the door closes behind me.

The vision of Bryanna in the bath as her peach-shaped breasts floated on the bubbles was exotic, but she’s now lying on the massage table, completely nude, her breasts completely bare, and her nipples are erect and gleaming with oil. Her head is turned away from me, and her shoulder-length hair has fallen over to the side and is covering her face.

I pick up a towel, intending to place it over her, but a quick surveillance around the room tells me there are cameras tucked into just about every corner in the ceiling, ensuring the sick fucks don’t miss a thing. I throw the towel onto a side table instead, and at the same time my cell buzzes. The message from intel tells me exactly what I suspected, and the device in my pocket has picked up audio tracking too. These bastards will know exactly what I say the minute my mouth opens.

I turn Bryanna toward me, and her eyes flutter a few times, then her wide doll-like green eyes open in surprise as recognition and then fear cross her lovely features. “You can’t be here.”

I clamp my hand over her mouth. “I’m pretty sure that I can, but I don’t take what’s not given. Do I need to ask for my money back?” I say loudly, and the look of fear and confusion in her glassy eyes makes my stomach roll. I lean over to kiss up her long creamy neck and make my way to her earlobe, needing to calm her and make sure the men behind the cameras don’t get suspicious at the same time.

“Quiet, cameras are on, and they can hear every word. Do as I say, Bryanna,” I whisper before pushing her hair from her face to take in the fluttering of those wide green eyes that are trying to focus on me without closing again.

“Do you want to play, or would you rather I find someone a little more willing?” I ask loudly, watching her eyes turn misty with emotion while undoing my tie for the camera, and giving her a moment to let it all sink in.

Bryanna struggles to respond to my question, and my jaw locks tightly, realizing that she can barely form a few words. This isn’t a case of being tired after a night of not sleeping well. I would recognize these signs a mile away. She’s been sedated half out of her mind, and it’s clear that she’s been given to me in this state to use as nothing more than a toy. The fact they’ve drugged her, left her completely defenseless, and sold her services to a perfect stranger pisses me right the fuck off! These bastards clearly don’t know who they’re messing with, but they will by the time I’m through.

“Do you want to play?” I repeat, my voice harsher and louder than intended, frustrated beyond belief these people have done this to her.

“Yes, of course,” Bryanna says, but the shakiness of her voice and the trembling of her bottom lip makes me want to do serious fucking damage to whoever has put her in this goddamn position.

“Very good, then I’ll give you instruction, and you’ll obey?” I tell her as I stroke down the side of her alabaster cheek with the tip of my finger.

Bryanna nods in agreement, and her fluttering eyes turn even hazier as I continue caressing her cheek. She nuzzles her face into my hand and makes a soft sound as her eyes continue to drift, and my cock hardens with desire for this beautiful young woman. I’m supposed to be protecting her, but she’s the most captivating woman I’ve ever seen. The way she responds to my instruction, even sedated, is intoxicating as fuck, and as much as I should, I

can't deny my attraction for everything about my little green-eyed charge.

I watch her eyes, still hazy with sleep and unspoken desire, blinking every few moments, trying to stay open for me, but she loses the fight, and her breathing starts to slow. I take hold of her wrist and count the beats. Too damn slow. Fuck!

I step back, make a show for the cameras of pulling my tie off, ease her head up, and slip the satiny material around her neck. I take a picture of her from shoulder up, then send it to Matt and copy the group, positive these fuckers think I'm just capturing a pic of my prey to ogle later when alone.

Need help getting her out. She's been drugged.

Roger that! Walk in the park. There's a fire exit to the left of your room. You know the drill, wait for the diversion."

I glance around, knowing exactly what's about to happen, quickly surveying the room to assess what I have to work with. She's covered in oil, and I need to make sure she's safe if things get out of hand, but in a way that doesn't cause suspicion.

"I hope you like fire play," I say to Bryanna.

She can barely keep her eyes open, but she hears exactly what I'm saying because her eyes try their best to stay open.

"We wouldn't want to mar this beautiful skin, so we're going to clean you from head to toe before we start, and make sure all of this oil is off." I walk over to the sink and grab a towel from the shelf, soak it with warm soapy water, and then gently rub the oil from her body. I then drape her in a massage table sheet, covering her from her feet to the bottom of her breasts, leaving them exposed, because that's the sick fuck these assholes expect me to be. While I want to cover her from these prying eyes, I need to get her out of here safe, so I swallow back my anger and leave her on the table as I go and soak one more towel.

I lay it beside her, and for those watching, they probably think it's for cleaning up after we've had a little fun, but in less than two minutes those fuckers behind the camera aren't going to know what hit them until it does. I count it down, stroking her cheek, pushing her hair back from her face and continue to monitor her shallow breathing. I hope it appears to those watching that I'm just another depraved fucker who would take advantage of a drugged-out female in no condition to say no to an unwanted advance.

When the blast comes and the fire alarm sounds, I reposition the draped

material and throw the soaked towel over her face. I balance her in my arms and grab her purse, then I carry her to the exit and wait. Another explosion rocks the sound barrier in front of the building, and that's exactly what I need. I use the heel of my shoe to kick the lock, and the exit springs open at the same time Jay's Volante squeals to a halt in front of me, and he throws open the passenger door.

I jump into the front with Bryanna still covered with the massage table sheet, while Jay accelerates and her naked ass presses against the heat of my cock.

Chapter 6

Bryanna

I shift, the blinding light making it difficult to open my eyes because my head and every muscle in my body hurts too badly to even contemplate lifting my eyelids. I nestle my face in the silky luxury of the pillow and snuggle into it, trying to swallow past cotton mouth of the worst kind.

The door creaks, and I peek as the man with dark brown spiky hair and stormy deep blue eyes stands with one hand on the door frame, watching me.

“Good morning; how are you feeling?”

I don’t answer, every muscle in my body seemingly incapable of movement, and it’s all I can do to keep my eyes focused and swallow down a wave of nausea.

He bends over me, placing his arm behind my back to help me sit up. “Drink a little, slow sips,” he says, holding a glass to my lips.

The water is cool and crisp and so refreshing. I begin to guzzle his offering, but he pulls it away and narrows his eyes at me. “Slow, let’s try that again.”

This time when he places the glass next to my lips, I take a small sip. “Good, nice and easy, now another,” he says, and that soothing husky voice seems to wrap around me.

I follow his instruction, and after another trickle of water has coated the dryness of my throat, he runs a wet finger over my lips and lays my head back onto the pillow. “Sleep. I’ll check back in a little bit,” he says before he leaves the room, and I begin to drift.

* * *

I wake to loud voices penetrating the fog in my brain. I try to open my eyes, but the dim light in the room triggers a blinding pain causing me to clutch my pillow, holding it against myself as if it can save me from this agony.

“I did what you said. I let her sleep, gave her water, and let her sleep some more. You told me they gave her a date drug that would wear off in hours. It’s been over an entire fucking day. What the hell did they give her?”

“The tests came back positive for Gamma Hydroxybutyrate, a commonly used drug that temporarily impairs the central nervous system. It usually wears off fairly quickly, but the dose she was given far surmounted the norm.”

“Can’t you give her something that will help?” the intense man growls.

“It doesn’t work that way, Damian. It has to wear its way out of her system. Give it a bit more time. Her vital signs are good. I have complete confidence that she’ll pull out of it.”

“She better, or the fuckers who did this to her aren’t going to live to see another day!”

* * *

I wake slowly, taking in my surroundings, and the dark-haired man with deep blue eyes is watching me. The man looking for me at the club, the one who followed me home, and the one who took care of me. He’s watching me intently, and his gaze is absolutely riveting.

He rises from his chair beside me and extends his hand. I watch the movement and try to reciprocate, but my muscles are so weak, I can’t even lift my arms. My eyes close as his hand runs over my cheek, and he pushes the hair back from my face.

“It’s been over twenty-four hours. Time to wake up, Bryanna. Squeeze my hand if you can hear me,” Damian says, putting his fingers on the palm of my hand.

I manage a squeeze, and he nods. “Good, I’ll get you some more water.”

“Bathroom,” I croak and wince as my dry throat strains with the effort.

“I’ll take you. Hang on to my neck,” the man says, sliding the bed coverings back and placing his hands under my knees before taking me into his arms.

I try to lift my arms up, but they still feel like dead weights, and his eyes

flash as he realizes my dilemma. He pulls me tight, cradled in his arms, walks me to the bathroom door, and sits me onto the toilet.

“Did you dress me?”

“I thought you’d be more comfortable in a strange place with some clothes on. All I could find was this t-shirt, and I was fresh out of panties. I’ll help with the shirt and then step out and give you some privacy, if you think you can manage on your own,” he says.

“I think I can.”

“You want me to lift the material a little bit, or would you rather do it yourself?” he asks, and I seriously don’t have an answer for him because my muscles don’t seem to be working the way they should.

“Can you hang onto me while I do it?” I ask him.

He nods, his deep blue eyes staying locked on mine as he places his hands on my waist to keep me steady. I sit up and grasp the material, pulling the hem up while still trying to keep myself relatively covered. “I’m good,” I say, starting to feel the muscles in my arms and hands. I remember his name now. “Damian,” I say.

He nods and stands, assessing me. “I’ll be right outside the door if you need anything. Nothing to be embarrassed about if you need help, okay?” he says gently, those blue orbs of his fixing onto my own.

I nod, and I don’t know why, but the kindness in his voice causes a lump to form in the back of my throat, and my eyes to burn with the strain of constantly holding back tears that threaten to fall. He stands to his full height and heads to the door. “I’ll give you a bit, but I’ll check on you if I don’t hear anything in a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, and as soon as the door is closed I adjust the t-shirt, because my bladder simply can’t hold out any longer. When I’m done, I flex my arms and hands, thankful the numbness is wearing off enough to wipe and flush.

The sink is within arm’s reach, and I grab the side of it to hold myself steady and push upward with my legs, trying to stand, when the door suddenly opens and my legs crumple beneath me.

“Whoa!” Damian scoops me into his arms before I hit the floor and scowls at me. “You were supposed to wait for me to help you,” he says, pushing the door out of his way as he carries me through it and back to bed.

I wanted to be able to do it on my own, but the effort to tell him is too much. The back of my throat still feels parched, and talking is difficult.

“More water?”

He nods, settling me into bed. “Stay here, and I’ll get you a few things,” he says, heading back into the bathroom. When he returns, he washes my hands with a warm soapy cloth, and then pats them dry with another. “The physician who’s been overseeing your care will be back in a while to check on you.”

“Thank you.”

He takes the glass of water and lifts it to my lips. “Nice and slow. I still want you to take small sips, so you don’t get sick.” Something about the tone of his voice sends a delicious little shiver down my spine and right to my center.

The cool, refreshing liquid feels so good on my lips, tongue, and the back of my throat that it’s hard not to swallow the entire glass down in one gulp, but his eyes are laser focused on mine, watching as I drink, reminding me of his instruction.

I run my tongue over my lips, and his eyes darken. He reaches for the tube of ChapStick sitting on the nightstand. “Let me put some more on your lips, so they don’t crack.” He watches me as he caresses my lips with the soothing balm.

I rub them together gently. “Mmm, that feels so much better. Thank you,” I say after he finishes.

“Are you hungry? I have a tater tot casserole or tomato soup in the fridge that I’m willing to share,” he says.

My stomach growls, and he smiles broadly as I nod. “Casserole,” I say, because the thought of warm ground beef with soft potatoes makes me realize just how hungry I am and how little I’ve had to eat for so very long. I will away the burning sensation at the back of my eyes because if anyone sees me cry, catches on, and tries to make trouble for my captors, I know what will happen.

All of a sudden, the stark reality hits me. “Oh my God. Where am I?” I’m not in the massage parlor. I was in the massage parlor, and they’ll be expecting me to be there, and to be ready for Friday night. “Where am I, where am I?” I demand, pushing up on my weakened arms and managing to sit up on my own.

He watches me intently, but doesn’t seem fazed at all by my outburst.

“How long have I been here?” I ask, gesturing my arms around the spacious room. The sun is no longer shining, but it couldn’t have been that

long, and hopefully I can still make this right.

Damian takes my hands with both of his, and his intense, deep blue eyes wash over me. “Stop, you’re safe. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. You were drugged, and now you’re at my penthouse. You’ve been here for over twenty-four hours,” he says, rubbing the tops of my palms with the roughness of his thumbs.

My mind wants to focus on the exciting little prickling sensations he’s causing as he caresses my skin, but the reality of my situation has finally sunk in. I have to find a way back quickly and be able to explain why I’ve been gone before the men who captured me make good on their threats. In order to do that, I’m going to have to get past this large and very intense man.

My stomach rumbles, and it’s the perfect excuse to get him busy. “I’m so hungry, do you think I could have some of that casserole?” I ask, because I need to figure out how to get out of here and back to where they expect me to be, now.

Chapter 7

Damian

I watch as she realizes that she's no longer with the people who drugged her and instead with me, but now she's frantic, which tells me my instincts were correct. I wish we were able to get more out of Layla, and Dereck's still trying, but she may not know any more than she's already told us. They're holding something over Bryanna's head, or she owes them something. Either way, we're going to settle this little debt one way or another, and Bryanna's going to come out on top. She just doesn't know it yet.

I tell her where she is and watch a myriad of emotions flash through her gorgeous wide green eyes. Her jaw shifts, and her lips purse together as she looks around the penthouse. Her stomach growls, and her green eyes widen with surprise, and then she tells me she's hungry.

I smile widely at her, because while she probably is starving, I also know exactly what this green-eyed seductress is up to. "Of course, would you like me to heat a plate up for you? Perhaps a salad to go with it?" I ask.

Her eyes are still furtively glancing around the room, quietly assessing. She doesn't answer right away, too caught up in her evaluation, calculating her chances of getting out of my bedroom and then out that door. As a security team, we have a rule: we don't keep people against their will. But I may need to do that very thing in order to keep her safe from the people who may want to harm her. "Bryanna, I asked you a question."

She starts at the use of her given name, not the one she's been using at the club. Her lips purse with feigned annoyance. "My name is Lacey; how many times do I have to tell you, and why did you bring me here?" Bryanna says, that hard, saucy little attitude she gave me back at her apartment coming into play again.

“Would you have preferred me to leave you in a burning building and drugged half out of your mind?”

Bryanna’s eyes mist with emotion, but she doesn’t cry, just shakes her head. “No, I appreciate whatever you’ve done, but I really am very hungry,” she says, and her stomach growls at the very same time, letting me know that it’s a very legitimate request.

She may be feeling hedged in, but she knows there’s truth in what I’m telling her. “They drugged me? Ming did?” Bryanna asks, and I can only assume it’s the dark-haired lady in high heels who came out of her room before I went in.

“Possibly, but you would know more about that than me. Did she give you a shot, or maybe something to eat or drink?” I ask, and her eyes finally stop wandering around the room and focus on me and the question that I’ve asked.

Bryanna nods, confirming what our physician thought. “She gave me a glass of water and a pill before my . . . um, well . . . my appointment,” she says, her cheeks turning a bright pink.

I’m supposed to be taking care of her, but being this close to Bryanna makes the blood thrum through my veins at an even quicker speed, and it’s certainly not the first time since I’ve been caring for her that I notice just how very attracted I am to my little charge.

“You need food,” I say, turning from her before she can notice my increasing arousal at the thought of her body lying on that massage table, covered in oil, her legs spread and her nipples erect, a vision I can’t seem to purge and will likely never forget.

I head to the kitchen and the casserole that Gaby has had prepared, thankful that wherever we go, she and her staff manage to keep us well stocked. I pull the oblong pan out of the refrigerator and dish a healthy heaping into two bowls, place them in the microwave, then fill a large glass with crushed ice, water, and a slice of lemon.

The microwave dings, and I pull the food out to let it cool slightly while connecting with her doc. “Bryanna’s awake. She couldn’t use her arms or legs at first, but I think the feeling is starting to come back. She was thirsty, so I gave her water, and now she’s hungry. No issues with food, right?”

“No, getting something into her stomach will be good for her. Go slow though, Damian. She may be hungry and can have all she wants, but introduce it slowly, one spoon at a time. I’m just leaving the hospital and

should be at your penthouse in the next half an hour or so pending traffic.”

“Excellent. I want to make sure she’s okay physically, but can you also talk to her and see what she needs in terms of emotional stuff? It’s hard to say what she’s been through,” I say, trying to obliterate the thought of her being abused, but no amount of trying is going to get that concern out of my mind.

“I’ll talk to her and see what she needs. Don’t worry, Damian. We’ll take good care of her,” he says before disconnecting.

I inhale deeply, trying to shake off the anger that seems to have caught me in its grip at the thought of her situation. I pull out the precut salad material, arrange some on our plates before drizzling it with dressing, place them on the tray along with some garlic bread, and carry it to the bedroom.

Bryanna is sitting up in bed. She’s still wearing my shirt, and something about that sends an electrical thrum and energy coursing through my veins. I settle onto the side of the bed and balance the tray on my lap, watching as her eyes track the movement. She swallows and reaches for a piece of the bread. The thought that she’s absolutely starving, in the most literal sense of the word, settles over me. I try my hardest to keep the anger from bubbling up so as not to scare her, but it comes with great restraint on my part. “I talked to your physician. He wants you to eat slowly, one bite and spoonful at a time. Since I can’t trust you to do that on your own, I’m going to feed you myself,” I say before I can put the words back into my mouth.

She glances up at me from underneath those natural lashes, and her wide green eyes watch me as I bring the spoon of casserole to her mouth. Her cheeks pinken like she’s embarrassed, and I try to restrain my cock from hardening at the sight of her lips encompassing my offering, but it’s absolutely impossible. I’m just thankful the tray is covering the obvious attraction I have to my seductive little charge.

Bryanna almost inhales the first bite, and my blood pumps with rage at the fact that whatever she’s been through has caused her such evident hunger. She swallows another, and I already have the next one ready for her. I know it won’t do her any good if she expels it, so I slow down. “Take a small sip of water, and let it sit on your stomach. The residual effects of the drugs are still lingering. If you get sick, we have to start over,” I say.

She nods and lifts the glass of lemon water all on her own and takes just a small sip.

“Good, take it nice and slow, doll,” I say, and her wide green eyes search mine out. They are swirling with a myriad of emotions, and she’s as surprised

as I am at the endearment that unintentionally slipped out.

I offer another spoonful of casserole, lifting it to her lips, and she eagerly takes the moist potato-and-meat mixture into her mouth. Bryanna lets out a soft little moan as she eats that goes straight to my dick, right before she swallows another bite I've given her.

"My aunt makes this meal. This is every bit as good as her recipe," Bryanna says.

"How's your stomach?" I ask, needing something to get my thoughts off of the sound of her little moans of appreciation.

"I think it's okay. I'm so hungry," Bryanna says softly, just barely above a whisper, and when I go to feed her another bite, the pent-up emotions she's been hiding, despite the drugs trying to get out of her system, come flooding forward, and her eyes fill with tears that spill down her cheeks at such a rapid pace, I can barely wipe them as they fall.

"I'm so hungry," she says softly.

"Bryanna, it's okay; let me feed you. Your physician will be here shortly, and he'll be able to tell if you need anything else."

She nods, but the tears don't stop. I wipe them intermittently as I spoon-feed her Gaby's casserole, and she greedily inhales it as I do.

I offer the last spoonful in her dish, and her wide green eyes settle in on my bowl. I can't help but smile. I can recall my mom saying something like a healthy appetite is a sign of a recovery, or some shit like that, and I begin to feed her the casserole from my dish as well.

The bowl is almost halfway gone when Bryanna looks up at me and her cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry! You haven't even had anything to eat! I ate all of my food and yours too. I'm so embarrassed."

She's so damn adorable that I find it difficult to concentrate. "There's plenty where that came from. There's an entire three-quarters of a pan left in the refrigerator. You can eat whatever you want, Bryanna."

She shakes her head. "Please quit calling me that. I told you; my name is Lacey. I appreciate you trying to help me out, but whoever you think I am, I'm not!" she says.

I can tell she's starting to feel better, and her thoughts have returned to getting back to that seedy little bar, solidifying in my mind that whatever they're holding over her is still a looming concern. I set the tray on the nightstand. "What if we just agree to disagree and I call you Doll instead?" I

suggest before my brain can control what's spewing from my lips.

Her eyes widen, the pulse in her neck quickens, and my dick throbs hard against the constraints of my zipper as I watch.

My job isn't to punish the people who have caused her fear, simply to bring her home, but Brian Carrington is going to get his money's worth on this job. Even knowing she was drugged by these people isn't incentive enough to deter her from running back to them, which only confirms my suspicions. She's glancing around, and assessing her way to the front door to make her escape. I need to find out what exactly they're holding over her head, because just taking her back home isn't going to fix the problem long-term, and she and I both know it.

The ding of the elevator alerts me to the arrival of the security team's resident physician, letting me know that he will soon be at the door of my penthouse. "That must be your physician. I'll let him in and be right back. If you're still hungry, feel free to finish the rest of this bowl," I say, gesturing to the dish of half-eaten casserole.

She smiles and nods at me shyly, drawing her knees up to her chest underneath my t-shirt, smiling at me in a way that makes me want to forget that she's a job, an assignment I've been given, or that she's young, but that's not going to happen, because I don't mix business with pleasure. I don't get involved with my cases, and I sure as fuck don't hit on ladies who've just barely turned of age; at least that's what I tell myself as I walk through the living room to go answer the door.

Chapter 8

Bryanna

After examining me, the kind physician walks out of the bedroom, along with Damian. I still have no clue how I'm supposed to get out of here with Damian guarding me. I'll never be able to outrun him; he's just so muscular, and tall, and panther-like, and so incredibly handsome. He makes every nerve in my body tingle when he's near, but this obvious attraction to him is not helping me in the slightest. I need to focus on figuring out how to get out of here and back to that bar before it's too late.

I'm contemplating all the options as he talks outside my door. The doctor may have told me to take it easy for a bit and not to rush things, but I simply do not have the time. I slip off the bed, testing the strength of my legs and mobility. As soon as both feet touch the ground, the room sways slightly. Grabbing hold of the footboard helps keep me upright. I give myself a few minutes, just letting the dizzy feeling dissipate, before glancing around the room in a desperate attempt to locate the flip phone my captors gave me.

I hear Damian tell his physician thank you for coming over on such short notice and for taking care of me, and I quickly make my way back to the bed, pulling the covers over myself just before he opens the door. I scrunch my eyes closed, pretending to sleep, but the pad of his boots don't go away, scuffing across the floor. He's getting close. I can feel him and smell the spicy scent of his body. I try not to focus on the fresh smell of soap or the presence hovering above me, instead staying focused on my breathing. The blanket on the bed moves, and he pulls it upward, covering me with its warmth. Then he pushes a stray strand of hair away from my face. "Sleep, Doll," Damian says.

I pretend to sleep and listen. There's a brief rustling of clothes, and then

the jingle of his belt, and a thud that sounds as though his buckle or something heavy hits the floor. The door to the bathroom opens and then closes. I suck in a deep breath, preparing myself for what I need to do. I could try to leave now, but if he's just going to the bathroom or brushing his teeth, he could overpower me very quickly, but I weigh that with the fact that I may not have another chance.

The shower turns on, and I slip from beneath the covers. He's left his clothing on the floor, and I kneel on the hardwood, running my hands over his pants, feeling the shape of a phone and something else. My trembling fingers pull out the flip phone my captor gave me, which is now completely dead, a credit card and a wad of cash. The next object makes my blood run cold. A handgun, small, so small. I don't know what I'll be facing tomorrow, and I know it's not right to take his belongings, but Damian can easily replace it if he needs to. I only have one chance to get back to those monsters and safeguard my family.

I don't have time to contemplate right or wrong. I just need to go while the water in the shower is still running. My clothes and shoes from the day before are nowhere to be seen, but my purse is lying on the chair. I grab it before snaking my way through the penthouse, out the door, and making a beeline to the elevator and hitting the button for the lower level. The doors seem to take forever, and I hold my breath, fearing any minute he's going to come barreling out of his penthouse. The door finally closes without intervention, and I breathe a sigh of relief as the elevator begins to lower, taking me away from the intense-looking man with deep blue eyes who could unintentionally cause harm to my family.

The walls in the small space are mirrored, and the person staring back at me is an absolute disaster. I run my fingers through my disheveled hair, smoothing it to the best of my ability. My makeup, unless you count the dark smudges underneath my eyes, is non-existent. The long t-shirt I'm wearing barely covers my thighs, but it will have to do.

I don't know if it's the enclosed space, or just the fact that I'm half-naked in his shirt, but the entire elevator suddenly smells like Damian. I'm completely covered in his scent, and it's wrapped around me like a comforting blanket. I only wish he could protect me, but even if he thinks he can, he can't keep me safe from these monsters, because they have so much money, they are beyond his reach.

The elevator dings as it reaches the lower level. I walk out looking

anything but ordinary in my oversized t-shirt, a strappy white purse, and bare feet. The streets of Michigan Avenue are bustling with energy as people make their way up and down the sidewalks, and the city is plentiful with taxis, and it takes mere moments to flag a cab.

The driver raises his eyebrows in the rearview mirror when I give him the name of the bar. “You sure that’s the name, miss? That’s on the other side of town, and no disrespect, but it’s not exactly the best part of town,” he says.

“Yep, that’s the place. If you can get me there fast, and promise not to tell anyone you’ve seen me, I’ll throw in an extra-large tip,” I offer, settling into the hard seat of the taxi as the driver navigates his way through the congestion of downtown Chicago. The streets are heavily lined with pedestrians enjoying the nice evening, and he navigates the traffic carefully, moving at a snail’s pace until we reach a road that will take us out to the highway.

When he finally pulls up to the bar, I recognize the seedy place that I’ve been working at for the last few weeks. I peel off five fifties with shaky hands and pass them up to the driver.

The cabbie counts out the bills and whistles. “Miss, you sure you want me to leave you here? I can stay and make sure you get back uptown tonight,” he says, zeroing in on me from the rearview mirror.

I capture his eyes with my own. There is something about the concern of a total stranger that makes me want to cry, but I push the flood of emotions washing through me down. I need to focus on getting back into that bar and smoothing things over with the bosses, if it’s not already too late.

“I’m fine, but thanks for the offer and for the ride,” I say, sliding out of the taxi and giving him a backward wave goodbye.

When I enter the bar, the burly bouncer who always seems to have a scowl on his face looks me over. “About time you got your ass back here. The boss has been cuttin’ you slack because his lady seems to have taken a liking to you, but that credit’s only gonna get you so far. No one told the ladies they put you off for two days. They had to cover all your shifts, lost their regulars, and the bosses still wanted their money. I’m boss tonight, and you’re going to get your ass in there and make up for all their shifts. You may be protected, but that doesn’t give you a free ride around here. Bring down the house with a good show tonight, and I might forget that you got lost for a whole fucking day,” he says gruffly.

“I’ll try,” I say, making my way through the bar. The stage lights are

aglow, and Layla's strutting across the long length of the stage in a bright red g-string and minuscule lacy top that's barely keeping her perfectly formed tatas from bouncing right out of the material. The minute her hands touch the long silver rod that extends from ceiling to floor, the crowd goes absolutely crazy. They know exactly what they're in for when Layla hits that pole.

I skirt behind the crowd who are all focused on Layla's tight bottom as it lowers to the floor and starts to squirm slowly upward. She knows exactly how to work a crowd, and not one person's eyes aren't completely mesmerized by her performance. I head toward the back and into the dressing room that is little more than a closet with a couple sinks, lockers, and floor-length mirrors.

The ladies are all in a state of undress, getting ready for the evening and putting their makeup on. Tanya is outlining her stunning blue eyes with a deep black eyeliner pencil, but she turns and does a double take as she sees my reflection in the mirror. She spins, and in a quick flurry of pink fluffy material has me crushed in her arms. "We've been so worried about you! Where were you?"

I've been here for such a short time, and she and Layla have taken me under their wings and been such a source of comfort. I hug her back hard, but that's about as much emotion as I can share, because I just don't have the luxury of confiding in anyone.

I slowly detangle myself from her heartfelt embrace, hoping she knows, without me saying it, just how much her kindness means to me.

"We were so worried about you when you didn't show up last night," she says.

Carl was right. No one told the ladies they gave me two days off; they just let them think what they wanted. "I'm okay, Tanya, and I'm so sorry about last night's no-show. I'll make it up to anyone who had to take extra sessions for me while I was gone."

I quickly throw my purse, which now holds all my new belongings, into the locker, select a bright, shiny pink costume, and head to the changing station. It may be nothing more than a cubicle hidden behind a curtain, with a small bench and full-length mirror, but it will do. I slide Damian's t-shirt over my head, and his scent envelopes me, causing my thoughts to return to just how attracted I am to him. I try to shake it off, though, because it's completely absurd to contemplate a longing that will never result in anything more than a fantasy.

I don't have much time. I brush out my hair, throw on some face paint, shimmy into the hot-pink g-string, and pull on the little triangular scraps of pink and silver glittery material, before donning a pair of bright pink-and-black platform heels. I take a deep breath and walk out of the dressing room and into the crowded little bar.

I see the big boss just as he catches sight of me. His eyes darken in anger, but he won't do anything in a crowd. He loves the money his ladies bring in, and I can only hope my show and the little number that Layla just did will be enough to calm his ire. He hasn't been horrible to me, but I also haven't given him reason to be upset with anything I've done, until now. I've heard the stories of how he treats the other women, but I've been sheltered to a large degree since Layla begged him to let me stay with her and not in the house where most of the women are usually kept.

The crowd is still in a state of high-pitched frenzy watching Layla take it all off. She works the crowd, grinding up and down the pole, before finishing with her signature pose and prancing off the stage under a thunderous applause.

I try to push down the fear, the awkwardness, and the nausea that bubble up every single night before a show, but I'm extra tense tonight. This needs to be a hell of a performance if I'm going to make up in dollars what I could have brought in the club the night before, and give my share to the ladies for the bosses. I head to the curtain and focus on my breathing, counting the beats of the pulsing rhythm, and on my cue, strut onto the stage like I've been doing it my entire life.

The tease comes first. A slow and sultry walk along the circumference of the bar, letting each patron take an up-close look at the goods barely covered by the minuscule g-string and bikini top I'm wearing. The music is pulsing and seductive, and I allow the soft timbre of the chord's embrace to flood through my veins. The routine comes intuitively, a tantalizing dance that teases and promises more with each long stretch of my body—a slight caress of a dainty shoulder strap, a toss of my hair, a display of my bottom.

The crowd loves it, encouraging me with cheers, whistles, and hoots that drive the excitement and energy in the room to a palpable frenzy. They know what they want, and I wiggle my way around the stage just like I've been instructed, making them wait, and building the fever. They know when it's coming, I hear the crowd's husky whispers and the inhalation of aroused breath, just waiting for the moment when I release my top, and the men begin

to cheer.

Chapter 9

Damian

The fact someone is holding something over this woman's head is evident, and Bryanna's clearly too scared to share whatever it is with me. She's looking for a way to escape this penthouse and get back to whoever it is that has a hold on her. I may not like the idea, but right now letting her lead me to her problem is the only way I'll find out what my little charge is afraid of.

Bryanna's pretending to sleep, so I take my cell and backup piece before leaving everything else she'll need in my pant pockets, and drop them to the floor before heading into the bathroom. As soon as the shower turns on, she scurries around the room. The jingle of loose change on metal alerts me to the fact that she's rummaging around and has found the items, just as intended.

I send a message to intel with instructions, and another to the men who are on surveillance, before tossing my cell on the counter and stepping into the shower. The pelting of the overhead water works its magic on my muscles, allowing me a bit of comfort while every muscle in my body is screaming for me to go after her, not to let her out of my sight for a minute, but that's not how this exercise works. I try to shake it off, letting a little time soothe my frayed nerves, but this woman has gotten under my skin like no one else has ever done. I'm just drying off when my cell beeps, alerting me that it's time.

Looks like she may be heading back to the club area.

It's exactly where I thought she would go, but damn if I hadn't hoped she would come to her senses and run back to me, or even far, far away, but that's clearly not Bryanna. She's going to head right back into the lion's den. I may have more than a healthy admiration for her courage, but I also have a

very strong desire to protect her myself and then turn that beautiful ass of hers upside down and paddle it red for putting herself in danger.

I get dressed, keeping myself paced to ensure she has enough of a head start to put a little distance between us and allow surveillance to do their job, but that also means they're going to be at the club with Bryanna. They will see what I already consider as mine, and I find that completely un-fucking-acceptable. I double-time to finish getting ready and rush out to the street just as Garrett pulls up in his old car with Keith sitting in the passenger seat.

I'm just about to get into the back when Dereck walks up to the car. "Jay's working with intel, and Matt and Cole are up ahead and trying to keep Brian cool on the phone. I'll ride with you," he says.

I give him a chin nod for thanks as we jump into the back. "Thanks for picking us up, you guys," I say to Garrett and Keith, knowing that Evers is just ahead of us with Matt and Cole.

"You get this car fixed?" I ask Garrett.

"It's ready for anything," he says, pulling out into the heavy city traffic. The entire team is the best crew I've ever worked with, and after so long and all the things we've been through, they are more like brothers than anything. I know each and every one of them feels the same and would do anything necessary to protect one another. All but Garrett, who I don't know at all, but Keith seems comfortable with him, and he's done exactly what I've asked up to this point.

I glance down at the message from Matt.

You owe me for dealing with Brian's ass!

I chuckle because I can only imagine what Matt had to deal with. Brian Carrington would do anything for Jenny, especially finding her missing niece, but he's also a hothead when it comes to protecting her and as controlling as they come.

I haven't seen Jenny in weeks, not since we got her out of the mess with the Chicago Mafia. Matt is the one who was in charge of her protection before she met Brian and after that asshole of an ex-boyfriend hurt her so bad. They've become great friends, more like brother and sister since that time, and talk on the regular. I know she's agonizing over the fact that her niece is missing, and it's probably killing Matt that we can't provide an answer for her yet. I also know he must be taking a shit-ton of heat from Brian, who is downright unruly when it comes to protecting Jenny from anything.

I pull up on my cell the tracking device on the security limo and watch the screen as the little blip of them following Bryanna makes its way back across the city, into the seediest part of town that I just pulled her from. “When we get there, I’m going in the front door. Evers is just ahead of us with Matt and Cole, who’ll run perimeter. He just pulled over, so you guys can take the limo, and Evers will drive in case things heat up. Can you two keep the limo on backup?” I ask Keith and Garrett.

“Roger that,” Keith says, while Garrett gives me a nod in the rearview and then pulls in behind the limo on the side of the road as we reach it.

The guys jump out, and Evers jumps in and pulls back onto the highway.

I turn to Dereck. “Can you keep your eyes on Layla? Find out if she knows anything else. She’s the best lead we’ve got. I have an entire team helping me watch Bryanna.”

“I can, but you know they probably have your ass on camera,” Dereck says.

“If they recognize and come after me, I’ll know who my fucking target is then, right?”

He shakes his head. “You’re not wrong, my friend. I just think you should have backup when you go in. What if Evers runs point out front, then I’ll watch Layla?” Dereck says.

“Hey, I’m the driver. When does the driver run point?” Evers growls.

Dereck turns to him and scowls. “Do you ever fucking smile?”

Evers glares at him for a minute and then his lips pull back, exposing a very white set of teeth. “Now that you ask, not since I stopped working security and started driving your sorry asses around. You want a point? You got it!” he says, grinning broadly first at Dereck and then at me in the rearview mirror.

“Roger that!” both Dereck and I say in unison, as I chuckle under my breath.

“You go in first, cover my entry, then find Layla, I’ve got Bryanna.” \

“Got it. Here, put this on,” Dereck says, tossing me one of the beanies he wears.

I raise my eyebrows. It may not be exactly my style, but it’s a disguise, and I shove my scruff underneath the hat. Evers pulls up to the curb while I inch the car door open and roll out onto the grass and into the bushes he’s parked beside. I watch as he gets out, comes around the vehicle, kicks each of the tires, and makes a show of checking for leaks before deciding everything

is okay, getting back into the car, and driving on without me.

I watch for a few more minutes and see a couple people in neighboring homes close curtains as I make my way through the bushes and into the little park that sits along the river. I follow it for about a block, weaving myself back toward the front lot of the bar, staying behind the dense hedge. A couple cars pull up, giving me the perfect cover. I walk out, seemingly from one of the farthest parking spaces, and join their group as we enter the seedy little bar together.

The lounge is smoke-filled, and my eyes burn within minutes of being in the small, enclosed space. My head may be down, but my eyes are alert, scanning periodically. The group I've joined meanders toward the small circular stage where Layla is giving it her all for the crowd. They're going crazy as she grinds her nude body along the length of the pole and ends with her tail in the air for the entire crowd as they erupt into a bunch of catcalls and whistles. A few of the customers have stood and are yelling for her to come home with them. I'd be more than a little worried about her if I didn't see the bouncers already in place, ready to deal with anyone who even looks like they're about ready to get out of line. Layla suddenly flips right into the air and then takes a bow, raising another house-resounding cheer before wiggling off the stage.

The lights lower and a sultry sound comes over the speaker, and my breath catches as the sight before me materializes. Bryanna walks onto the smoke-filled stage, an erotic illusion with shoulder-length dark hair, bright green eyes that are amplified by the neon lighting, and a pink barely-there costume. My dick hardens to stone, as if I didn't already know just how attracted I am to my little charge.

The music pulses seductively, and Bryanna doesn't miss a beat. She almost glides to the erotic rhythm, and when the tempo heats up, so does she, making her way across the floor, teasing the audience, and my cock, as she does. She spins on her pink-and-black platform heels, giving me and the entire audience a very up-close glimpse of her heart-shaped backside, which is decorated with a hot-pink ribbon of satin. I save that image to my brain, because it's the same little ass that I want bent over my lap as I paddle some sense into her for showing it to everyone in this fucking bar.

The beat drops, and everyone waits. Bryanna spins around again, lowering her ass seductively to the floor in time to the music. I'm mesmerized, watching as her toned backside shimmies as low as it can go

without touching the stage, and then slowly, and ever so indecently, wiggles all the way back up until she is standing.

The dance continues, her teasing the crowd right along with my pulsing dick. She's getting ready for the finale, and while I may want to see every inch of her delectable body, the very possessive side of me doesn't want her anywhere near these men in this state of undress.

Every man in this room is waiting to see her bare herself to them. All I can think about is how to keep her from doing exactly that without endangering her life, and the sad reality is that I can't. There's something I don't know yet, but I'd bet a fair sum of money that she returned to the people who drugged her because she had no other choice, and figuring this shit out is now my mission. I know damn well that she's not here by choice, and I'm not going to find out why by snatching her off that fucking dance floor.

My eyes track the men all staring hungrily at Bryanna. I want to pummel every fucking one of them, but that's not going to keep her safe. I have to trust that she'll lead me to the truth. She's come back to this place for a reason, and after more than a day, someone's not going to be happy that she's been gone. Whoever that is, that's the person who's going to help me get some answers so I can get my green-eyed Doll out of here. That doesn't make it any easier when she spins on those pink-and-black platform heels and releases the little clip on her pink-and-silver bikini top, exposing her perfect peach-sized breasts and nipples to every horny man in the room.

My dick throbs at the sight, but my jaw tightens because my head isn't in the game. The crowd goes wild, and I clap right along with them, because she is a beautiful dancer, and the performance was stunning. Her eyes lower with what looks like embarrassment, even shame, and that confirms my theory, and my resolve to get her out of this situation intensifies. I look around, and these horndogs are all watching Bryanna bare herself, and it fucking pisses me off. This woman is messing with my fucking mind.

She gives the crowd a sexy little look, spins as if by routine, and bends completely at the waist, giving the crowd and myself an extremely up-front-and-personal view of her ass, before leaving the stage under the deafening sound of thunderous applause.

I text a group message to Matt and Cole, who are in their places outside, letting them know she's in the building and I've got my eyes on her. Dereck's still in the back of the bar, and I give it a minute before making my way

through the throng and ducking into the back hallway, but stop short and slip into an open doorway when I see two men down the hall push Bryanna into an alcove in the long corridor.

“Where the hell were you?” a voice growls at her.

“I don’t know exactly. I don’t remember anything after the waxing parlor. I woke up and some sick son of a bitch had me all tied up. He untied me to go to the bathroom, and then left me that way when he went to shower, thinking I’d gone to sleep. I made it out of that place with my life due to sheer dumb luck!”

“Good thing you did too! I’m tired of babysitting your ass and listening to Layla mother you. Tomorrow night can’t get here soon enough for me!”

The men leave Bryanna and start talking amongst themselves as they head back to the lounge. I linger in my crouched position behind one of the doorways, waiting for her to come out and head to the dressing room, but instead I hear what can only be her crying, and something foreign in my chest tightens at the sound. All I can think about is pulling her into my arms, comforting her, and wiping the tears I envision falling from her beautiful deep green eyes.

I will myself to physically stay in place and keep from going to her, knowing it will only add to her anxiety. If I needed any more proof that she was being held under duress, then that was it. I need to find out what’s happening tomorrow night, as quickly as possible.

I listen as Bryanna quietly sobs. Her sniffing slowly starts to subside, and she gets herself under control. She must have had a robe backstage, because she walks out of the alcove in a short silky one and those platform heels, which do nothing to hide and everything to accentuate those long, sleek limbs.

I watch as her heeled feet take her toward the end of the hall, watching her perfect ass, barely covered, swaying back and forth until she reaches the dressing room. It’s only my sheer restraint that keeps me from marching forward, scooping her into my arms, and carrying her like a caveman off to the safety of my home.

Bryanna suddenly stops walking.

I just barely pull myself into the little alcove and avoid being discovered, and watch her through the venting.

She slowly spins toward me, glancing down the long hall, and then shakes her head slightly before turning and entering the dressing room.

Damn, that was entirely too close. I can make out female voices beyond the wall and know that Bryanna's safe for now. I text the group to make sure someone has their eyes on the back door, and come out of hiding and head back to the lounge, pulling the beanie a little lower on my head. I'm pretty sure I blend in with the crowd, but I also know they probably have pictures of me from the massage parlor. At least they should, if they have security that's worth a dollar of their money.

I head to the bar and order a beer, settling at one of the two-seat high-top tables toward the back of the club just as the next lady prances off stage and the curtain closes around her. The entrances and exits are all covered, so if someone tries to move Bryanna through either, they won't get far, but that doesn't settle the blood racing through my veins, knowing that any minute something unexpected could happen that would place her in a world of danger.

The music drops a beat and then rises in a crescendo, giving all the patrons a chance to finish what they're doing before turning their attention to the stage. A long-haired blonde, one of the quieter women from the dressing room, walks out onto the stage. She's dressed in a bright red lace cover-up, with panties and a little top on beneath the see-through garment. The music starts, and she sashays around the dance floor, but all I can think about is Bryanna. She should be safe for the night because all indications are that everything's going down tomorrow, but my instincts seldom let me down, and something doesn't feel right.

The music's crescendo draws anyone who didn't already have their eyes on the stage to the blonde, who tosses her long, silken locks from one side to the other before dipping to the floor, pausing, wiggling her ass, and then looking back at the audience and seductively removing her cover. The audience wants more, and she makes them work for it, teasing them as she parades her way around the floor, dropping again. The crowd goes crazy while she's bent over, and then she slowly rises, turns to the crowd, and shimmies out of that tiny top that leaves her bare with the exception of her high heels and little red g-string.

We're jealous as fuck out here.

Yeah, it's a pretty hard surveillance.

This blonde is someone's wet dream, and she would have been mine

weeks ago, but that all ended when a certain green-eyed Doll stole my interest, and all I can focus on right now is the fact that she's not in my sight and could be in danger.

A waitress in a barely-there skirt and triangular top which barely covers her voluptuous breasts introduces herself as Hannah and asks me what my drink of choice is. I raise my beer. "We're in Chicago; Goose Island," I say.

This wins me a wide smile. "Coming right up, and we've got plenty of the local brew in stock tonight!" she says, winking at me, and then scribbling my order on her little white pad.

"The girl on the floor," I say, catching her attention before she moves on.

"Her name's Mikah. What about her?" she asks, glancing nervously around the room.

"Come closer," I say, holding my beer up and tapping her note pad, as if we're talking about my order. "She's hot. How much to get her alone for awhile?" I ask, low enough so no one else can hear. I have no doubt they must be selling the girls services too. The more information I get about how this operation works and who's pulling the strings, the better.

"You're new around here. I'm taking a chance. You paying extra?" the waitress says, looking down her nose at me, and then glancing around to see who's watching as I take in the entire lounge surroundings myself.

"A lot, but I go to the top-of-the-line. If Mikah's as good in bed as she is on the stage, I may want her for the night, and I'm not accustomed to waiting," I drawl, slipping five hundred-dollar bills onto her serving tray and placing my empty beer bottle alongside it.

She glances down at the money. Her eyes widen in surprise at the amount, and she nods slowly, assessing me. "Lord help me if you're vice or some sick fuck, but you're going to the top. When I bring your drink back, the instructions will be on the back of the receipt. You hurt Mikah, and people I know will kill you without blinking an eye."

"I'll treat her like a princess," I say, hoping to alleviate some of the fear in the older waitress' eyes.

Hannah nods and spins, making her way to the bar as the dancer on stage continues her show. Her arms are stretched, grasping her toes, and then inch by inch she slowly rises from the floor. Mikah gives everyone in the bar a slow-motion view of her long hair falling around her face as she raises her torso, leaving the crowd with a view of her raised arms, firm tits, and open center, and the men go absolutely wild as she ends with the splits.

I'm watching her face, her eyes, waiting to see a triumphant smile, because she's damn good at what she does. If she enjoys the dance, she deserves to feel good about it, and that's what I hope to see, but there's nothing like that going on in her eyes. Instead, there's this distant far-away look, and as she waves to the crowd and turns, there's nothing but a bleakness and sorrowfulness in her eyes that makes me wonder if she's being held against her will, right along with Bryanna.

I text the guys, letting them know I've found a way to get some more information, just as the older waitress saunters my way with a beer. She lays a receipt on the table next to my drink, making a show of popping the top off my bottle while she waits for me to read what's been written on the back of it.

Vintage Hotel on Testle Ave. Check in as Mr. Goose. Exactly 10 pm. You have one hour, unless you message HappyParty to this number, which will extend your time with her.

The waitress is making like she's busy, placing my beer on a napkin and then wiping down my already clean table. "I'm new in town; where's the hotel?"

"Pull out of the parking lot, take a left. It's two blocks up the street, first hotel on the right. You can't miss it. You treat her right, got it?"

"Absolutely, if I want her for the night, I text that number and she's mine?" I say, glancing around to make sure we aren't overheard.

Hannah is nervous and pensive. She must be going out on a limb for me, so I slide another couple hundred dollars onto the tray and watch her eyes go wide. "I will treat her exceptionally well; her safety is not a concern. I want to make sure she's mine for the night if I like what she's offering."

She nods. "I already cleared it. Text the message on your receipt within a half hour, and Mikah's yours for the night. You give another three to her," the waitress says, and there's something in her eyes that makes me feel that she's not unhappy about the proposition of me meeting up with the blonde, even though this woman threatened my life just moments ago.

"I'll be there," I say, watching her leave and texting the instructions to intel and the guys to make sure we have coverage at the hotel, while periodically taking a sip of the cold fresh brew she's brought me in case anyone is watching.

The music hits a climax, alerting everyone in the bar that another show is about to begin. I glance up, expecting to see one of a variety of women from the dressing room, but not expecting my green-eyed charge to be prowling across the catwalk in those insanely sexy legs, encased in those insanely high heels.

My dick hardens as I let my eyes glide from her thighs to that sexy little g-string, up to the exposed creamy skin of her waist, to the triangular-fashioned little top designed to tease every red-blooded man in this bar. In the short time I've been assigned to her case, she's somehow managed to turn a man who doesn't do relationships of any sort into one who only has eyes for her.

I can't get the memory of the way she looked lying in my bed, watching me with those deep green eyes, from my mind, just like I'll never get the image of her swaying those curvy hips in front of me all night long. My eyes are completely glued to Bryanna, and my dick is as hard as stone watching her play to the crowd, and as if she can feel me, her focus turns to me, and recognition settles into those gorgeous wide green eyes.

Chapter 10

Bryanna

I walk off stage and behind the curtains before taking the small silky robe from one of the hooks on the wall. I slip into it and fasten the belt as I make my way down the back hall. I'm heading toward the dressing room, hoping to run into Layla, when I'm suddenly pulled by strong arms into an alcove and pushed against a wall, coming face-to-face with the big boss.

"Where the hell were you?"

I've always known it was a possibility, but no one has gotten physical with me before. I swallow down the lump in my throat and try to stay the fear that seems to have overtaken my body and has turned my legs to jelly. If they think I ran, all of my suffering will be for naught, so I rely on my tough girl act.

"I don't know exactly. I don't remember anything after the waxing parlor. I woke up, and some sick son of a bitch had me all tied up. He untied me to go to the bathroom and then left me that way when he went to shower thinking I'd gone to sleep. I made it out of that place with my life due to sheer dumb luck!"

"Good thing you did, too! I'm tired of babysitting your ass and listening to Layla mother you. Tomorrow night can't get here soon enough for me!" the boss exclaims before walking away with his right-hand man.

As much as I try, I can't help the tears. I give myself a little time, but only a few minutes. I need to make the club some money tonight or I may learn the hard way just how rough that man can really be, because Layla can only protect me from so much. I take a deep breath, calming myself for the rest of the night as I head toward the dressing room.

I'm almost to the door when the strangest sensation comes over me, and

my entire body tingles with an exciting little current. It's the same feeling I get every time Damian is near. I know he's not anywhere close, but I spin around anyway, searching the hallway, and sigh heavily, realizing it's just a cruel and disappointing illusion. Why would Damian even think to come after me? He tried to help me, and I stole from him, and then left the safety he provided.

I walk into the dressing room, and the girls are all getting ready for their shows. I'm planning to repay favors tonight, because dancing for me last night probably cost them an hour doing something else that would have brought them a lot more money, and many of them have huge debts to pay to the bosses.

"So, who do I owe next? There's a ton of men out there with dance cards just waiting to be filled up." They can't take these dance cards, our code name for a quick lay, if they're on the dance floor. "Come on, at least four of you must have taken my dances last night. That means I'm going all night. Tell me when," I say.

"Layla told us the bosses put you off the schedule. That's not your fault, but if you really don't mind, you could take my 6 p.m. tomorrow. I have an offer that will pay a lot more than that," Tiarra says, not even glancing up while continuing to put her makeup on at the mirror.

"I think something's happening tomorrow night, but I'm not sure what time. If I'm here, I'll gladly take your place," I say, looking from one of the girls to the other.

"I filled in for you last night, but you don't have to dance if you don't want. I know you're new, and this has to be hard for you," Mikah says, walking toward me in her red see-through corset and stick heels.

"I'm happy to fill in for you. When do you go on?" I ask the voluptuous blonde.

"I have two more shows tonight. I'm up next, and you just came off, so I'll do this one if you take the next one," says the soft-spoken blonde. "I'm not sure what happened last night, but it's very nice of you to offer to do the sessions. I'll let them know before I hit the stage that they're calling you for a couple spots," she says, hugging me close.

"You're very welcome. Happen to know where Layla is?"

She shakes her head. "No. Come to think of it, I saw her dancing and then talking to some good-looking guy on the floor, but I haven't seen her since."

Mikah walks out of the room, and Liza spins from the mirror she's been

looking at and glares at me with bloodshot eyes. “You know what you cost us last night?”

I shake my head, because I don’t have a clue what she pulls in.

She pretends to spit into the air before turning back to the mirror.

I’ve done everything anyone has asked me to do, and nothing, at least intentional, to deserve this much of her wrath. “What did I cost you?” I ask, sincerely wanting to make things right.

“They originally had you scheduled for back-to-back dances at the end of the night because some of us had better offers. I drew the short straw and got stuck dancing the whole hour of prime time for a fraction of what I could have brought in, having to cover for you. The little bosses may have called you off, but the big bosses still expect the same damn cut from the rest of us,” she huffs, turning back to the mirror to paint her lips bright pink.

“I don’t have money to compensate you, but if you’re scheduled to go on tonight, I can take your dances so you can do whatever you want.”

Her troubled eyes capture mine in the mirror, and her brows raise in surprise. “Are you serious? You’re protected. The men can’t touch you without the boss’s say so,” she says, watching me in the mirror.

“I always pay my debts, no matter what. Tell me what time, and then have the switch arranged. I’ll take your place on the floor, and you lose the attitude.”

She gives me the onceover and then nods. “Alright, if you take my ten and ten-thirty shifts tonight, we call it even. I should be able to make up most of the money with a few of my regulars.”

I’m now committed from nine thirty until eleven straight, but I can do this. Hours of yoga and dance classes will sustain me, and I need to do this. “Take care of the switch, and consider it done,” I say, heading toward the costume closet on the far side of the room to rummage through options for the night.

I slide into my next costume and step into the insanely high red stick heels that will most certainly be a challenge, but I vow to conquer them just like the other girls have. The sexy little red g-string is a perfect fit. I take hold of the minuscule triangular-fashioned top that is fully intended to show more of my breasts than it covers, pulling the little straps across my shoulders. The image in the mirror looks way too exposed, but I now have a debt to pay. I finish a few touch-up swipes to my makeup, apply a final coat of glossy red lipstick, and I’m ready.

I walk down the hall that takes me to the stage entrance, waiting at the curtain for the dramatic-looking smoke to fill the dance area. When it does, I take a moment, inhale a deep breath, and count the beats for my cue, and then strut onto the stage as I've been trained to do.

As a dancer, the routines are not complex, because it's a passion, something I love and have done for years, but I'm not usually in a crowd, definitely always dressed, and never in heels that are this fricking high.

I sashay across the stage, proud that I haven't already come tumbling face-first atop these stilts, as the crowd whistles, sends out catcalls, and chants for me to take it off!

I do my best to shake everything off, put it out of my mind, and focus on the music, but an almost magnetic draw pulls my eyes in the direction of the back corner of the room, and as my eyes meet those of the man at the high-top table, my entire body quivers with recognition and uncontrollable desire.

Chapter II

Damian

I'm mesmerized, watching as Bryanna's hips sway gently to the music, building the tempo along with the beat until she spins and begins to absolutely command the stage. My eyes are riveted on her body, and there is no way I can turn away. Bryanna senses me watching her and turns toward me, searching me out in the dim light of the club. The minute her eyes meet mine, they lower. The audience may think she's a little embarrassed, or that she's just playing coy, but I've come to know that little tell. I shouldn't be so damn attracted to my charge or to her submissive side, but hell if her every move doesn't make my blood race with desire.

I watch as she finishes, and the MC tells the crowd to settle back in and order a drink because she'll be back shortly for a couple more. The men hoot and holler, banging the bottom of their beer bottles on the tabletops. "Settle down now, men," the MC says. "She's just putting on another little costume for you, and for those of you who may have been waiting for your favorite tonight, talk to your waitress, because they've been freed up to play."

My jaw tightens at the very thought of Bryanna doing another dance, much less more. This throws a wrench into all of my plans. I have to go and meet the blonde who just came off the stage. I can't stay here and protect Bryanna, which means another one of my team is going to have to come in and do it for me so Dereck can continue to cover the other side of the room. The thought of them sitting here watching my green-eyed Doll dance her way out of her clothes inexplicably pisses me off to no end.

I send a text to Matt, because he's completely head-over-heels in love with Marenah, and for whatever reason, that makes me feel slightly better, but not much. The lights go dim, with little sparkles of silver light hitting the

stage as Bryanna comes back into view. This time her hair is piled on top of her head. She walks out onto the stage, swaying to the rhythm of the sultry beat. The lights sparkle lightly around her as the smoke clears, and she's left in a spotlight in the center of the stage.

Bryanna is dressed in a crisscross top that covers her firm and perky tits, but just barely. If she inhales too deeply, her pert little nipples are going to pop right the hell out of the strappy top. Her torso is completely bare and shows off an indented little waist that flares into the curves of her hips and ass, which is covered in only a black and silver thong.

I can't take my eyes from her as she teases, and she feels me watching her. Through the throng and daze of the lights, her eyes search mine out and then find them. I don't even pretend to hide the desire running through my veins. It would do no good; she senses it, her green eyes hazy and simmering with desire. Bryanna continues to tantalize the crowd, swaying gently before slowly removing her top, and baring the pink tips of her nipples. This show is for me, regardless of how many people are in the room. Her eyes don't leave mine as she bares herself, touches and taunts the erotic flesh, and then slowly walks toward the pole in her six-inch black-and-silver strappy heels.

I glance down at my watch, knowing exactly how long it's going to take me to get to the hotel. I'm also pretty certain the lady will wait, and she'll need to, because my feet wouldn't move right now if my very life depended on it.

Bryanna caresses the pole with one hand in time to the erotic beat, slowly walking herself around it, her long, toned legs and beautifully shaped ass on full display atop her sexy heels. She gains a bit of motion, swings herself around, slow at first, just teasing the crowd, building their anticipation, before her feet lift off the ground, and she spins gracefully around the silver rod. It's like gravity has left her body, and even my throbbing cock takes a break as I watch this magnificent creature swirl around and around until finally she grasps the pole with a curved ankle and slowly lets herself slink down its length before finishing in a wide-open split for the crowd.

The room goes crazy, everyone yelling at the top of their lungs, men closer to the stage throwing untouched bills at her, but as she comes up from her pose, her eyes know exactly where I'm at. Her eyes don't leave mine for a minute as the crowd gains tempo in their cries and chants for more.

I have exactly ten minutes to get my ass to the hotel so I can get information to save Bryanna's ass, but damn if it doesn't take everything that

I've got to actually stand on my feet, put one foot in front of the other, and leave her in the room dancing for these men. I walk out, and Matt walks in. He's good at undercover and doesn't give me so much as a glance as we pass. I may not like that he and Dereck will both now see her in this state of dress, but I do know that her life is safe in their hands, and getting to the bottom of what's put her in this situation is what matters right now.

I race to the Honda, and Garrett's in the driver's seat.

"Where's Evers?"

"I don't think pops trusted me with the limo, so you're stuck with me. Keith and someone named Scottie are on backup."

My eyebrows raise, because I didn't realize Scottie was still in the States. Last I heard he was going to be working on the opposite side of the ocean, but if this ends up being a cross-continent issue, he's got a hell of a lot of connections with all the overseas bureaus which may come in pretty fucking handy. "Sounds good" is all I say.

"Keith sent me the address. The Vintage Hotel on Testle Ave. is about six minutes away. Buckle in, unless you wanna be late," Garrett says, easing out of the parking lot and then flooring it as we reach the main drag.

He pulls up to a low-to-mid-class hotel in record time, and I get some of the guys on a call. "Same drill as always. I'll text every ten minutes. You don't hear from me, you send someone to check on me last. You get word to every man we've got to make sure Bryanna gets out of that bar safe tonight," I say.

"We had it the first time." Evers is usually a man of little words, but him and everyone on the call can be depended on to follow through with my direction, even if he is a grumpy smart-ass.

I check in at the nondescript little hotel desk as Mr. Goose at exactly 10:01 p.m. How the hell does a young, lanky, nineteen-year-old-looking kid who looks as though he should be playing video games, eating pizza, and drinking soda manage to find himself behind the counter of a hotel fronting for a brothel? He searches the screen in front of him for my reservation, and his eyes register recognition when he finds it. "You have room 314, on the top floor. Take the elevator, and it's down the hall to your right."

I'm sure the third floor of this hotel is about as prestigious of a room as they have. I refrain from giving him a tip, or just a talk about life, not wanting to draw attention to myself, but there's something about the kid that makes me want to take him under my wing and get him the fuck out of here.

I exit the elevator and head down the hall to room 314, briskly knocking, waiting to see if the woman at the club will have the good sense to look through the peephole and make sure it's the same person who got cleared by the waitress, or if she'll just open up the door to anyone who knocks.

Mikah opens the door immediately, and I would be thoroughly disappointed, except there's something in her eyes as she assesses me that makes me believe she hasn't yet been conditioned to this shit.

"Who cleared you at the bar?" she asks.

"Waitress named Hannah." Clearly anyone who knocks on that door doesn't just have permission to come in and take what they want. Mikah's careful and takes precautions, and I like that.

I push the door the rest of the way open and follow her, sending a quick text to the group to let them know I'm in her hotel room as we reach the living room.

Mikah's dressed in a bright red corset, fishnet stockings, and black-and-red-heeled shoes that have to be at least five inches in height.

I look down at her. "Hannah said we could have an hour, more if I wanted."

She spins, eyeing my phone as I slip it into my pocket. "Would you like a drink, or are you one of those men who just like to get right to it?" she asks, heading to a small bar in the corner and pouring herself a generous glass of vodka with a little red soda of some sort.

I'm watching her, but haven't answered, and she spins abruptly, taking me in with those violet eyes. "Hannah says you asked for me specifically," she says, flouncing her long blonde hair from one side to the other.

She has that move down pat. It's the same one she does on the dance floor, but something tells me there is so much more to this young lady than wanting a quick hour's worth of money.

"Finish your drink," I say, panning my cell around so the app can get a lock on any cameras that may be in the room, while pretending to photograph the beautiful young lady.

Mikah's eyes go wide as she follows my phone, but I drag a quick finger across my lips. It hasn't picked up any audible surveillance, but it picks up the digital signal over the bed just as I spot the camera disguised as a tiny little dot in the corner of the ceiling. I have no doubt the film of whatever happens in this room is captured and sold, but this simple little info gathering session just got much more complex.

I stalk toward her, taking the glass from her hand and tilting it to her mouth. “Drink, I like my woman relaxed and ready,” I say, although that’s far from the case. What I really like is my women shivering with anticipation of the unknown and unleashed desire.

Mikah steps backward, and her entire body goes absolutely rigid. I’ve scared her, with absolutely no intent to do so, but I need this to look real in order to find out how to infiltrate this operation and get Bryanna, and perhaps this blonde, out.

I pull her close, and the fear I sense is palpable. “You’re not in danger, Mikah. I’ll get you out of whatever trouble it is that you’re in, but I need you to stay on this side of the room for a little bit and tell me what you know about Lacey. They have cameras over the bed, and I’m sure that video will go back to whoever you’re working for, so tell me what I want to know, whisper it in my ear, help me figure out how to help you and Lacey. If you tell me what I want, I’ll personally make sure that you never have to worry about money again.”

Mikah’s scared, shaking against me, and I feel horrible, but I need that goddamn information, and she’s going to tell me what I want to know. “I’m not going to hurt you, but Lacey doesn’t have much time if I’m going to help her. Trust me, please.”

Her body softens against me, but just slightly. “I don’t know all the details, but I heard the bosses talking about Lacey being auctioned off as a virgin at the masquerade ball in New Orleans tomorrow night. The boss was in an ugly mood about something she did. He was on the phone telling someone to pick Lacey up after the next dance tonight and told whoever it was to drive her south and keep their hands off the merchandise. Said that if she isn’t delivered as a virgin, he’s going to take it out of their ass. That was before I left. She might already be gone,” Mikah says softly, her violet eyes wide with emotion.

“Good girl. Now, they’re expecting me to take you to bed, and the cameras are on. Do what I say and put on a good show. There’s a ton of money and an entirely new world waiting for you,” I say, texting to Scottie for backup, before gently pushing her toward the bed.

Chapter 12

Bryanna

I end my dance with the splits and look up, right where Damian was sitting, right where he was watching me with those intent smoldering eyes that held me captive and wouldn't let me go. The disappointing fact that he's left, even after the intense connection I thought we had, and I try to focus on the thundering applause instead. I bow to the crowd, giving them a long glance at my backside, before prancing off the stage and toward the dressing room to quickly change for the next show.

Damian left, and I can't blame him. He did everything that he could to help me, even took me somewhere to keep me safe, and how do I repay him? I steal his things and leave without a thank you or a note of any kind. I've probably pushed away the very last chance I have of being saved, but I have no other options. I have to protect my family, regardless of what he thinks.

He couldn't even be bothered to stick around, try to talk to me, let alone rescue me again. He's probably going to report back to my aunt that he found me, and I stole his money and went back to stripping. By the time Brian sends more of his security team in, I'll be long gone. I'm on the short list. Tomorrow night is coming fast, and I know that if I don't go through with this, my family will be the ones to pay the price; something Damian would never understand.

I've almost reached the dressing room when the small hairs on the back of my neck raise, and a shiver runs down my spine as a strong hand grabs my shoulder. "I think you've had enough fun for the night. Where did you stash the money you made this week? We haven't seen a dime of that yet."

"It's in my purse, in my locker. I promise, I was going to give it to Layla to give to the boss."

“Get it!” he says to one of the goons. “Time to get you somewhere safe for the buyers,” the gruff man says to me, half dragging me past the dressing room and toward the exit sign at the end of the hall.

I take in a deep breath, trying to calm the fear settling into every nerve ending in my body. It was always going to happen, but perhaps in a small corner of my mind I was hoping that Damian would be able to help, but even that little glimmer of hope is now gone too.

My captor slides his card over the lock, and as soon as he does, we’re in the open air, and they’re hauling me toward a bright red Caddy that’s waiting right outside of the bar. The burly guy pushes me into the back seat and slides in beside me. His partner joins us in a few minutes, opens the opposite door, jumps in next to me, and tells the driver to go.

I watch as the car makes its way out of the bar parking lot, turns onto the straightaway, and then steadily accelerates for a few miles, until the driver takes a sharp turn and merges onto the highway. “Thought we had company for a minute, but doesn’t look like it now,” the driver says, accelerating to get in line with the eighty-mile-an-hour traffic.

“Looky, looky,” the man next to me says to the driver. “She’s got a little firepower back here, and more than five hundred dollars tucked away to boot,” he says after rummaging around in my purse and tucking Damian’s gun into his suit pocket. He throws my strappy purse at me, minus the money and the gun. “Make sure we’re not being followed! She’ll bring in more than most if we can get her there by tomorrow and on time.”

“I’ve got this,” he says as he puts his foot to the floor, and we barrel down the highway until he can’t go any faster in the middle lane, swerves into the fast lane, and then guns it, shooting us past all the slower-moving traffic, and then just as quickly dodges back into the middle lane, over to the slow lane, and then off the highway ramp and into a business district.

“If they were still following us, they aren’t now,” the driver says.

“Excellent. Keep your foot on the floor. We need her in New Orleans fast.”

“Whoa, no one said I was picking up an overnight job,” the driver says.

The man next to me tenses and then pulls out his pistol and levels it at the driver’s head. “Drive. I’ll tell you when your job is done. Got it?”

“Take it easy, man. Just tell me which way you want to go, and I’ll get you there,” the driver replies, watching the three of us in the mirror.

“We’re heading south. I’ll give you directions as we go,” says the man

next to me as a sharp pain stabs my shoulder from the opposite side of the car.

* * *

I try to open my eyes, but my eyelids feel like they're weighted, and my mouth is so dry I can barely swallow. I blink them open, little by little, and try to focus on my surroundings. I'm not sure how long I've been asleep, but I'm all alone in the back seat, and two of the men who grabbed me are up front.

"Better get a move on, or we're going to get stuck in Friday night traffic down by the Quarter. We would have been here hours ago if your asshole partner didn't want to stop at the dive joint instead of just grabbing fast food. Now we're barely going to make it on time," one of the men says.

"We wouldn't have hit the rush hour traffic if we had gotten through the city earlier, but we'll still make it in time. The ladies will just need to get her ready faster than normal. Glad I didn't order the same thing Jimmy did. He just texted and said the shits just started to subside. He's going to stay holed up at the hotel until tomorrow. He'll rent a car and drive down."

I watch with blurred vision as the car weaves in and out of the city traffic, and then, after another hour or so, veers off the main drag and takes a few turns before coming to a screeching halt. "Get her into the parlor. She's been out for almost twelve hours. They need to have her sobered up and ready for the party fast. The buyers have already landed," one of the men says.

The sound of the car door makes me jump. I try to take in my surroundings, but all I can see are streetlights in the distance as he almost drags me from the car to the entrance of the building. The large bouncer-looking man lets us in, and they haul my half-inebriated body through the door and down a long-lit hall until we reach another door that is closed. The man in front of us opens it, and I'm pushed into a room that looks like a salon, with elegant mirrors and chairs lining both sides of the walls.

"Sit," the large guy says, pushing me into one of the chairs facing the mirror with lights that circle it. My butt comes into contact with the seat, and I try to get back up, but a heavy hand lays down on my shoulder. "Easy, before you start trying to get away, you might recall what brought you here in the first place," he says, looking down at me with deep, pitiless black eyes.

I put my hand up to my eyes, shielding them from the strength of the lights, and my stomach rolls as I regain perspective, and his words sink in. The only thing that matters to me, and they know it. I've already agreed to their terms, so there's no going back at this point. I sink into my chair, and have almost fallen into a drug-induced sleep when a rough shake to my shoulder rouses me.

"Time to wake up. Slevia will get you ready for the show. Make sure you keep your end of the bargain and that you're on your best behavior. Do not embarrass me, or you know what happens, understand?" the man looming over me says.

I nod, swallowing down the nausea that threatens. It is now time to pay the price for keeping my family safe. The reality is finally starting to settle in, and it helps to lift the heavy fog in my brain that is weighing me down.

A pair of long, bony fingers snap in front of my face. "Why the hell does she look drugged out? I need to have her ready for that auction in less than two hours. The rules were clear—no drugs or alcohol in her system. What is it that you neanderthals don't understand about that?" The skinny intense blonde woman who's walked into the room tsks as she hovers around me, lifting my eyelids and tapping my cheeks with the palm of her hand, while asking if I can hear or answer her.

I nod, unsure how it's already Friday night, but lives depend on me doing whatever they tell me, and so I will.

"Take her into the spa area. Let's get her under the shower and see if we can get rid of the drugs in her system. Damn it! The orders were clear. We have three foreign buyers who all want the same thing, virgin and completely consensual, and one of them has already hand-picked this little angel. They're going to want her to tell them it's consensual for records' sake, and under the influence will definitely disqualify her for the buy."

"We didn't want to chance that she'd try to escape like the last one," someone says, but he is quickly shut down by the surly blonde.

"Enough, you better hope whatever you've done hasn't excluded her from the running. The bosses are anticipating this little angel to bring in a great price, and if she doesn't meet all the criteria, there's going to be hell to pay."

"She'll be fine after a cold shower and some coffee. Make sure she's ready on time," one of my male captors says before heading out the door and slamming it behind him.

Another woman joins the blonde, and they assist me from the chair, out of

my clothes, and into the shower, giving me instructions about what to wash and how to shave, then speak animatedly to each other in a language that I don't recognize. The water is not ice cold as I half expected, but warm and refreshing. They give me time, talking amongst themselves outside the shower door. I begin to wash my hair, and as my fingers come together to rub the shampoo into my scalp, I feel a ring on my finger, something I've never worn. I rinse the shampoo off my hand to get a good look at the silver and gold band, wondering if every woman picked up by this group is branded with the very same thing. I finish rinsing my hair and then quickly shave everything the way they've instructed.

The minute I step out of the shower, I'm quickly thrust into a fluffy white robe. A short dark-haired lady with long, pink-striped nails is waiting for me, introduces herself as Greta, and gestures for me to sit in the chair that's in front of the mirror.

She runs her fingers through my wet, tangled hair. "Don't you know what conditioner is?" she says, frowning as her digits ensnare in my locks.

"I didn't see any in the shower," I say.

She scowls and reaches for a product on the counter, places some in the palm of her hand and begins easing it into my hair. She is so surprisingly gentle, working the product through my hair, combing it out and then drying it smooth, that I almost drift back to sleep.

"There, let's get your makeup done, and then we can get you changed and ready for the evening," the woman says. She paints my face with soft strokes and brushes that glide over my eyelids, under my brow, my cheekbones and then all over my face before she is done with her work. "I think we're about finished here. Open your eyes and look in the mirror."

The young lady staring back at me has been transformed into a much prettier version of myself, with full lips, eyelids covered with soft, muted colors, long lashes enhanced by mascara, and outlining that emphasizes the shape and green of my eyes.

"The masquerade has already started, and they'll be ready for the auction soon. Let's get you dressed, and I'll go over your instructions," Greta says, urging me to get up and disrobe before pulling a smooth-as-silk white dress over my head. The short little number with spaghetti straps is surely made for someone half my height, because it barely covers my naked ass.

I glance in the mirror, and without a bra my nipples have hardened from the coolness in the room, and the white silky material just emphasizes their

peaks. I try to pull the hem down, but it doesn't move. If I bend over, even slightly, anyone watching will get a full glimpse of my lady bits. There's no time to ponder, though, as she instructs me to step into the five-inch-high silver heels that in another life I might have drooled over. In this life, they are just the last thing to put on before I head to my fate.

I nervously grab my purse, not wanting to lose the flip phone they make me keep or my connection to Layla and the girls. Greta takes it from me and places the long, thin, dainty-looking purse over my shoulder, adjusting the straps to fall between my breasts, causing the drag to accentuate them further. When she's done, she tucks a lipstick, a small travel-size pack of bathroom wipes, a tampon, and a small pad into the purse. "In case he isn't able to wait until he gets you home," Greta says, as I swallow down my nausea.

"When you go on stage, you will not speak, you will stand upright with great posture and smile. If someone asks, you are here because you are looking for the man of your dreams. When the winner of your sale is announced, they will have the honor of unveiling your mask, and until then, you will wear it," the woman says, tying a white masquerade mask over my eyes.

"You're one of the fortunate ones. The man who will purchase you this evening has a woman for any one of his many desires, but he's hand-selected you from thousands to be his virgin, so he will treat you like a princess. That is not the case for many of the girls who walk through those doors," Greta says, leading me out into a long hallway and walking with me to the end, where a small curtain hangs.

"Remember what I've told you, and when asked, this is your choice. When the MC calls your name, walk out and stand in the circle that will be shining in the middle of the stage for you."

Chapter 13

Damian

I know the camera's on, so I try to make it look good, but all the hell I can think about is Bryanna, wide-eyed and scared, at the mercy of whatever it is she's been roped into doing for these bastards. She's at least ten minutes away by the time I get in and out of here, and back to the bar, and they could snatch her at any time. I step back and snap a couple pictures of the blonde just for show, pretending to send it to someone and instead messaging Scottie.

Need help! They're auctioning Bryanna in Orleans tomorrow night. They're going to grab her soon. Can you take over here so I can slip out and get back to the club?

On my way, Lad. I'll act jealous, you don't give a shit as long as I pay you. Matt and team have things covered. She's fine, Dame.

Roger that. I offered Mikah a new life in exchange for the info. You need to get her out of here.

Consider it done, lad.

Mikah's sitting up on the bed, watching me with big wide eyes, and her lip begins to tremble. She knows that what she's just confided in me could cost her life and that of anyone close to her. What she doesn't know is that we'll make damn sure that she and anyone she cares about is given a new identity and will have enough money to last them a lifetime.

I lay her down on the bed, slowly for the camera, but I'm also mindful that this needs to look real. I slide my hands up her legs, over her hips and waist, and bend in like I'm about to kiss her, just biding my time until the

door bursts open and we both reel in surprise, mine feigned, but hers completely genuine.

“Get your fucking hands off the lass,” Scottie growls as he bursts in on que.

“I don’t know who you think you are, but I paid fair and square,” I come back.

“Go get your money back; she’s not for sale. I saw her dancing earlier at the bar, and she’s going to be mine. And for the record, lad, I always get what I want!”

“Crazy son of a bitch! You want her that bad, keep her. More where that came from,” I yell, slamming the door as I walk out, double-timing it back to my car. If they’ve been watching the cameras, then they expect me to come storming back to the bar, perhaps to demand my money back, maybe to get a new girl. I race to the Honda, and Garrett is waiting for me.

“Buckle up,” he says, easing out of the parking lot and then flooring the car as he hits the main drag and heads back to the bar. It’s less than ten minutes away, but every minute causes my nerves to tighten in fear.

If they plan to auction her off tomorrow night all the way down in New Orleans, then time is short. I read a message, letting me know Matt’s been filled in and that he has intel working on every single private plane out of this city, and absolutely nothing’s coming up on the radar.

I reply to his text that they’re not flying but will be driving all the way. They have at least thirteen hours in front of them, which at least gives me a chance to get shit in place before this auction goes down.

It’s not like him not to respond and we’re going to need help and connections quickly to pull this off.

I hit Matt’s number, knowing he has a straight line to Brian Carrington.

“Matt here.”

“You still have eyes on Bryanna?”

“Roger that. She’s still dancing, but Layla slipped out the back door and we were a little distracted. Dereck went after her,” Matt says, and while the thought of her baring herself to him or anyone else in that fucking lounge infuriates the hell out of me, if Bryanna’s still dancing, she is still within reach, and that’s what I hold on to as we make our way to the bar.

“Make sure Brian is up to speed with what’s going down. I’ll send a play-by-play by text that you can forward to him. If they try to get her out of the country after the auction, we may need some powerful connections.”

“Brian’s willing to do anything and everything possible. He’s been texting me constantly since you found her. He can be a real pain in the ass when he’s stressed, but he has a heart of gold. I’ll give him an update, just keep in touch and let me know what you need.”

“Roger that.”

Garrett parks a discreet distance from the lounge, and I jump out of the back seat of the car and head toward the bar. I’ve almost made it to the front door when my phone rings with a call from Matt. “Yeah.”

“Dereck just texted. Layla found out they’re going to take Bryanna out the back door of the bar, but then took off. Dereck will stay with Layla. Nick and Cole are on surveillance in the back and have their eyes wide open.”

“Make complete confirmation! I want to see the film; otherwise, I’m going in. It could be someone else in disguise if they’re onto us,” I say, knowing how these fucking shadow games work and that we can’t be too careful. If they’re going to move Bryanna and we don’t stay on their tail, they’ll disappear right under our fucking noses, and we’ll never be able to find her again.

“We’re fairly certain they’re going to move her by car all the way to New Orleans. Get on the horn and set up at least another four crews,” I instruct.

“Roger that; we’re all over it, Dame. They just brought Bryanna out the back door. Intel has facial recognition. It’s positive; it’s a go! Double-time it back to the main car. We’ve got enough gear loaded in there to make the trip, move, move, move!” Matt yells into my headset.

My heart is racing a thousand beats per minute as I run back to the black limo and slide into the back, seat and Evers hits the gas. “Tell me you’ve got her in your sights,” I say.

“We’ve got ’em alright. A guy’s walking her straight to a car. The team’s all over it,” Matt says.

“Don’t have them take her yet, Matt. Bryanna’s in trouble. They’re holding something over her head, and we need to figure out what it is, or she’ll never be free of this. They’ll just come back for her, or she’ll take off again.”

“Roger that, Dame. You’re point on this job; we take your lead.”

“I told the guys I’d cover for you while you were at the hotel. Nick just texted to let me know two guys are putting her in a bright red Caddy.”

“Make sure we’ve got good drivers ready to go.”

“We’ve got it covered. Stand by,” Matt says over the car speaker.

“Nick and Cole will be right on their ass. If they’re watching close, they might think they have a tail, but then they’ll veer off and we’ll take over,” Evers says from the front seat.

“Roger that, Evers,” I say, sinking back into my seat, inhaling deeply, and trying my best to get the tightness in my chest to ease up as he accelerates the vehicle.

I hit my phone and connect with Matt. “Who’s on to take over after me and Evers?” I ask, already knowing that me and Evers are taking the first watch.

“Keith and Garrett.”

“Why Garrett?” I ask, scowling, because if my estimation of time and traffic is correct, those two are going to have some of the slower inner-city traffic, and it’s not as easy to keep from being spotted in those conditions. I know Keith, and his talents as a wheelman are par none, but if he needs a break, I’d rather it not be someone we barely know, with no experience to speak of.

“You have a beef with Garrett, Dame?”

“Maybe, why’s he in?”

“He was a wheelman way back with Keith, but if you say he’s out for this job, then he’s out. It’s your point, but I gotta tell you, that man can drive, Dame. If I were running point, I’d keep him on.”

I’ve heard the stories about Keith, and his driving is legendary, and if he’s vouching for Garrett’s driving ability, then that’s all I need to know for now. “He drove fine to the hotel and back. If he knows his way around as a wheelman, let him stay, just put an extra pair of eyes on him. He may be a good driver, but I don’t want him getting shot if shit goes sideways.”

Matt laughs. “We’ll talk later. You don’t need to worry about Garrett. He can hold his own, Dame.”

Nick’s voice comes through the overhead speaker. “Hey, guys. I’m here with Cole, and things are going as planned. They’ve caught the bait surveillance, so we’re going to pull off at the next ramp and let them think they lost us. We’ll stop and get another car, you take over, and then we’ll circle in behind you. We’ll stay about a mile behind but be there for backup if needed. They should reach you in another four minutes,” Nick says before disconnecting.

Evers is already in position and watching as the Caddy barrels down the highway. He pulls into the right-hand lane behind the car we’re surveilling.

“We’ve moved in behind them and will stay on their tail for awhile.”

I can see an outline of the top of her head. They’re not going to harm Bryanna; they won’t dare put one little bruise on her skin if she’s to be auctioned tomorrow. They’ll want her completely perfect for the buyers, but that doesn’t make it any easier not to get her out of there right the fuck now. But Bryanna is hiding something and will run, and she’s going to keep running back to them until we know for certain exactly what they’re holding over her head, find the people who are responsible, figure out how this operation works, and end this nightmare for good.

“How’s the crew doing with getting her family into protection? I may be wrong about them holding her family over her head, but according to our sources, many abducted women are coerced into doing things against their will by fear of harm coming to their loved ones. It may not be the only thing they’re holding over her head, but at least they’ll be safe until we know more or learn what it really is.”

“The team is en-route to pick them up right now. If you give the say-so, we could take Bryanna right now,” Nick says.

“Negative, negative. Just keep her safe and give us an update once her mom and the kids are moved. Keith and Garrett are standing by to take over when you give the word.”

***It’s about three hours later, and the men we’re following have stopped at a diner and then a hotel to drop one of their men off. Each time, requiring us to switch cars and drivers to avoid being spotted. I get a text from Jay letting me know that Bryanna’s family have made it to the safe house, and a car switch is set up not too far down the road for Nick and Cole. I get them on the overhead. “Hey, there’s a Shell station with a McDonald’s two exits up. Veer off, and there will be another car waiting for you. It’s packed with more supplies and food, and probably full of donuts,” I say, knowing Nick and Cole’s penchant for sweets.

“Hardy har har,” Cole says good-naturedly, but doesn’t bother to deny the age-old sweet tooth we’ve all grown used to and that he isn’t about to give up anytime soon.

“The good news is you won’t have to wait too much longer. They’re making another stop. Time for us to get off their tail and let someone else take over.”

“We’re sure keeping Jay and Matt busy tonight. They’ve done a good job staying ahead of the coordination on everything,” Nick says.

“Roger that. I’m going to switch with Evers so he can get some rest,” I say.

* * *

It’s about five hours later and Evers has already gotten back into the driver’s seat, and Keith and Garrett are tailing Bryanna when the overhead comes on. “We’re pulling off now. Both men are heading inside the store. Bryanna isn’t going in with them,” Keith says.

“Pull up to the gas station to the left of the pump they’re parked at,” I tell Evers.

He gives me a scowl in the rearview mirror, but I give two fucks. Right now, I just need to make sure she’s in that back seat and has a pulse. “I have to make sure she’s alive,” I say, knowing his cover will be blown, but the need to make sure Bryanna is okay is overwhelming to the point of undeniable, fuck protocols.

The car slides up next to the pump. The men have already started walking toward the back of the store, presumably to the bathroom. I open the door and slide out on crouched knees, walking like a penguin in between the pumps, slowly opening the back left passenger door of the red Caddy. Bryanna’s dark hair is spilled out over the seat, and there’s a long blanket covering the rest of her body. I run my hand down her cheek and over the pulse of her neck. She’s not sleeping, she’s beyond that—completely drugged—but her breathing and pulse are good.

I brush her hair back, and remove the ring I’ve had since adulthood, the one with my family crest carved into the platinum band, and slip it on her finger. “It won’t be long, then I’ll know all your secrets, Doll,” I say, brushing a light kiss over her forehead before I hear Evers clear his throat outside. I close the door quietly, make my way back between the pumps, and slide into the back seat, staying as low to the floor as possible while Evers finishes up.

He starts the car and pulls over the gravel road heading to the highway, letting Nick and Cole know to take over tailing Bryanna and that we’re heading for the next car swap location.

“You can get off the floor now,” Evers says, accelerating the gas.

I take in his deep-penetrating eyes watching me in the rearview mirror.

“You better hope they don’t scrub her for bugs, Dame. If they do and they find your tap, you just put that girl in a world of hurt.”

Chapter 14

Bryanna

I hear my name and make my way onto the stage, trying to stay upright in the five-inch heels they've dressed me in, while my knees and thighs tremble with trepidation. A virgin and completely consensual, that is what whoever plans to buy me wants. I try my best to shake the nerves, but it is absolutely impossible. I swallow down the lump in my throat and raise my head, glancing out over the crowd of men in a mix of black tuxes and fine business suits, and every single one of them has a mask on his face and is here to bid on my virginity.

I try to recall my instructions, pull my shoulders upright, and smile at the audience as my stomach churns with a deep sense of foreboding. Crystal is called next, and she joins me on the stage, standing right next to me, so close that I can feel her fear.

“Ladies and gentlemen, a late and surprise addition has just been added to the room. We could not in all good conscience keep this incredible little gem from your options. Please help me welcome Dahlia to the stage. Ladies, please make way in the circle for our newest member.”

Three women in total, all to be auctioned off. At the end of the night, we will no longer hold our fates in our hands. Instead, we will be slaves to the desires of the men who buy us, pay the most for us, and have the ability to circumvent the law, ensuring none of us will ever return to our families or the lives that we previously led.

I feel the touch of Dahlia's shoulder against my arm as she makes her way onto the stage. The MC gives the men in the audience the rules. He tells them how the bidding will start, lets them know how each part of the process will be handled, right down to where they will collect us when they're

finished, and then it is time.

The spotlight brightens as he speaks, putting us all on display for the room full of buyers. I swallow again, trying to keep my nerves at bay, lifting my eyes to glance around, but the room past the stage is dim and smoky, and all that can be seen are shadows lurking in the dark. I keep trying, letting my eyes roam, but the opportunity for adjustment is short-lived as the lights above me suddenly brighten, and the glare blinds me to the men in the room.

“Gentlemen, we’ll start the bidding with half a million. It’s going to be an amazing night. Here we go! Crystal, step out and turn around,” the MC says as the sound of drums roll in the background for effect.

I feel the girl next to me move and watch as she nervously steps forward. I try to keep my eyes averted as she is instructed to spin and then turn for the crowd. She looks absolutely terrified, and I’m sure none of us will look much different when our names are called.

My angst is short-lived because the MC calls on me next. The drum rolls, and that’s my cue. I step out on shaky heels, still somewhat lightheaded, trying my very best to spin, before making it back to my spot on the stage as Dahlia is called.

“These ladies are prime choice, men, and they are just waiting for you to bid on them. Here of their own free will, they are just waiting for you to take them home and make them happy. Should we start the bidding, gentlemen?” the MC says.

The resounding roar of the crowd is answer enough. “One million dollars for Crystal; do I have another bid?” the auctioneer calls out.

“One and a half million; do we have more?” he coaxes.

He begins calling out numbers as paddles are raised in the crowd, over and over. “Going once, going twice and ... sold,” the auctioneer finally says.

“I know some of you already had your preferences picked before arriving this evening, but we could not in all good conscience let such a wonderful addition pass you by. Take a good look at Dahlia, gentlemen, and then begin to place your bets. We’ll start at one and a half million. Do we have one and a half; do we have two million for this lovely young lady?” the auctioneer sings out.

The crowd roars, and the auctioneer hums in the microphone. “Gentlemen, order, please. Put your bids up! The lady is up to five million dollars. Five point five million dollars. Paddles in the air, gents,” the auctioneer says, and the crowd goes wild again.

“Six million dollars. Get those paddles in the air if you’re still in,” the MC continues, and some of the men groan as the price increases past their wallets’ allowances.

“We’ve got three active bidders. Anyone else want in? Gentlemen, good luck. Six and a half million dollars. Who wants to beat that and take Dahlia home with you tonight?”

The crowd collectively roars and groans in their excitement, and the auctioneer keeps the momentum, skillfully driving up the price. “I’ve got seven million in the back; do I have seven point five?”

“Seven point five to the man in the back right corner. Do we have eight million dollars. Come on, this angel is going home with one of you tonight. Eight million, going once, going twice, and sold to the man in the back right corner!”

The astronomical amount of money resonates in my foggy brain as the crowd absolutely roars with the announcement.

“Okay, gentlemen, well that was a little bit of excitement, if I do say so myself, but we’re far from done. We still have one lovely young lady here who wants nothing more than to pair up with someone who is willing to take care of her, treat her like a princess, while making all of your fantasies come to life. Remember, this one is a virgin. Who wants to take her home with them tonight?” the MC asks, and the crowd gets louder.

“Alright then, let’s start the bidding at eight million for Lacey.” I hold my breath as the reality that men are actually bidding to buy and to take my virginity sinks in.

“Tell me how much she’s worth to you, gentlemen.”

“Nine million,” comes a voice from the back. I try hard to keep my gasp inaudible.

“Nine million,” the auctioneer announces. “Do we have any others? Paddles in the air, gentleman, raise them high, let me see them,” he coaxes.

“Nine point five million dollars from the man in the far left, ten million dollars at the back. We’ve got eleven million dollars from the man in the center of the room. Do I hear more?” the auctioneer asks.

“Fifteen million dollars,” says a voice amongst the crowded chatter.

“Fifteen million. Going once ... going twice ... and if there are no more bids... Sold to the gentlemen in the back,” the auctioneer says.

The glaring stage lights suddenly turn off, but it takes my eyes a few minutes to adjust to the change in lighting, and by the time they do, I see two

men standing. I would know Damian anywhere, in any crowd, but both men are now in the center of the room, leaving me with absolutely no idea who just won the bid.

I watch as the men turn to each other, and my heart falls when Damian's jaw locks in anger. They shake hands, at the very same time the room begins to spin, and my knees buckle beneath me, causing me to slump to the floor, completely at the mercy of whoever chooses to pick me up and take me home.

Chapter 15

Damian

The last leg of the trip is uneventful now that Bryanna's captors have dropped one of their men off at a hotel, but I can't get Evers' words out of my head. It's highly unlikely with the equipment we use that someone would pick up the tap planted on Bryanna, but Evers' comment leaves a nagging doubt. If they do find it, I could have cost her everything. After a few hours of contemplating, the feeling won't go away. I need confirmation that I haven't put Bryanna in more danger and send a message to our tech crew, feeling only minimally relieved when they assure me the devices we use are the best in the business, and the one in my ring is almost impossible to detect.

We're nearing the outskirts of New Orleans when Matt sends a text to let me know that everything is in place. He gives us the address of a custom clothing shop and Evers navigates through the bustling city streets until we arrive at a little brick-fronted store just off the main thoroughfare.

When I walk in, the shopkeeper looks up from behind the counter and assesses me from over the top of a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. "I'm Damian Moletti. Brian Carrington had an order sent in for clothes," I say, glancing around at all the mannequins strategically placed around the shop wearing black suits and custom tuxes.

"The order's ready. Let's have you try them on," the shopkeeper says, gesturing me to follow him as he walks toward the back of the shop. "My instructions were to get you in and out as quickly as possible, and to be discreet. My other customers have been moved to later in the afternoon. You'll find everything you need to try on laid out for you," the shopkeeper says, leaving me at the door to the dressing room.

I try on the tux first, and damn if it doesn't fit like a glove. I head back

out to the little gray-haired man, who assesses me. “Perfecto! You’ll also find accessories laid out in the dressing room. They are intended for you, and that mask is a necessity to get into the event,” he says, still nodding as he continues to appraise his work.

I head back into the small cubicle, and in the corner are a pair of dress socks and shoes, along with cuff links and a shiny new watch that I hadn’t even noticed. Brian Carrington! I was part of the crew that protected the love of his life when the mafia came to get her, and I know how intense that fucker can be, but he was over-the-top generous to everyone during that whole ordeal, and his lavishness clearly extends to people who are helping her niece, as well, and for that I am grateful.

He’s provided everything necessary to get me into the auction, and I earn a greater respect for the man the more I get to know him. A hothead for sure when he’s concerned about his lady, but damn, does he take good care of the people who protect him and his family. I finish dressing and walk out to get eyed up by the older man again. “It is good. So good. No changes needed,” the shopkeeper says, nodding.

I smile at the enthusiastic man. “I couldn’t agree more. The clothes look great, and I appreciate your work on everything. I’ll just change if you want to wrap everything up,” I say.

“You’ll find a key and enough cash in the pocket of your tux to get you through anything which may arise, in addition to a new credit card. You have permission to spend as much as necessary on the card, and Brian stressed the word unlimited. No expense spared. You’ll also find cash and cards in the other two suits.”

I nod, taking it all in from this man, and feeling around for a wad of cash. “Thanks for your help with this,” I say, peeling off five hundred-dollar bills and then extending my hand.

He shakes his head and refuses to take my offering. “I’ve been more than compensated. Godspeed.”

I head back to the car, slide into the back seat, and Evers gives me an update. “We’re heading to a hotel that’s been reserved in your name. Keith and Garrett just reported in. They’re still a couple hours out with the delay they had at the restaurant and the stop at the hotel. They’re just barely clearing rush hour,” Evers says, navigating us through the throng of midday traffic and then along the coast of the Mississippi River until he veers off to the sky-rise and pulls up into the front entrance of one of the swankiest hotels

in New Orleans.

“I’ll let you out here and go park. The security teams are already in place and have secured your room. The private elevator in the lobby will take you to your penthouse. The key card for the elevator is in your pocket, along with the credit cards and invitation,” Evers says.

“Sounds good. I’m going to get ahold of intel and then take a nap before we head to the event tonight.”

“Roger that, the rest of the crew are already in town and settled in, and backup on the road for Keith and Garrett just checked in, and everything’s going fine. The teams are monitoring, get some rest. It’s bound to be a long night. I’ll be upstairs once I get parked,” Evers says, and I can’t help but grin, because Evers just said more in the last five minutes than I think he has at one time since I met him.

* * *

When I wake, the sun is just starting to set as I stare out at the impressive view of the bend in the Mississippi River on the horizon, and the French Quarter, watching as the sun begins to descend in the distance way beyond the Gulf of Mexico. When the sun is no longer visible, I glance at my watch and begin to get ready. It will soon be time to discover what really happens at these masquerade balls.

Once ready for the evening, I meet Evers downstairs. He navigates his way down Canal Street, heading toward the French Quarter, but then turns off and moves into a colorfully lit street of the downtown district. I watch out the window as couples saunter down the sidewalk, some holding hands, others in larger groups, making their way into the various little side shops and bars.

When we reach the end of the street, the prestigious Canal Manor comes into sight. The historic building was just recently refurbished, and while it still maintains the old-style Southern charm, the entire façade looks crisp, clean, new, and inviting with the stark white of its exterior contrasted with the deep burgundy letters of the establishment’s name scrolled along the top.

Evers turns into a side street and drives around to the rear of the establishment, a private entrance for those with an invitation, before stopping at the gate. One of the uniformed guards leans into the window and asks for

his pass. Evers hands him the plastic card provided by Brian through whatever connections that he has. The guard eyes it, then both of us for a moment and then waves us forward as the gates begin to lift. Evers navigates around the parking lot to let me out of the car.

A very well-dressed man in a black suit and light blue shirt, who is larger than any other bouncer I've ever seen, opens the door and waves me through. Another man, sporting a silver goatee and wearing the same-colored suit combination walks up and gestures for me to follow him.

We reach the VIP area, and the lounge is filled with sultry music, reminding me exactly why jazz and other easy listening music has always been so appealing. The dimly lit bar area is filled with people watching a woman with long dark hair. It falls in soft curls all the way to her waist. She's wearing an ankle-length bright red dress split down the side, exposing her shapely curves from hip to thigh as she sways in her five-inch strappy heels. The woman seductively croons to the crowd as the band backs her up, keeping perfect rhythm to the story she sings. I take in the affluent members of the club, some dancing with partners and some caught up in the performance, but everyone is intently focused on her, and all the males are wearing a mask.

The blue-shirted host leads me through the room and to a private elevator. Once we get on, he swipes a key card, which takes us to the upper level of the club. The doors open into a sprawling lounge with a long bar along one wall and a large horseshoe-shaped stage in the very front, with tables and chairs strategically placed around it and the entire room.

He guides me to a table at the back and pulls out a chair. It's early, but it won't be for long. "Please let one of the waitstaff know if there is anything we can do to assist you between now and the time the auction begins. The MC will go over the rules before he starts the bidding," the man says before making his way across the room.

I slide into my chair and take in my surroundings. There are three bartenders who are serving drinks, each wearing a black and blue uniform. Five of the eight stools are occupied, all by men dressed in black tuxes or expensive suits, and each wearing a mask similar to my own. I count three topless waitresses making their way from table to table, and one eventually stops to take my order.

She writes down my selection, then keeps moving, while my attention shifts to the door. Every once in a while, someone I recognize from

downstairs walks in and finds his seat at a table in the room. The number of attendees walking through the door is surprising. I count eighteen in total, including myself, all wearing black suits and a matching mask.

The lights in the room dim, and two burly suited bodyguard-types take their positions against the double doors, facing the interior of the room. Another man comes out in a black suit and crisp blue shirt, also wearing a mask, and introduces himself as our MC for the night. He begins to recite the rules for not only the bidding but for the auction itself, including where and when the winners will be allowed to pick up their prizes.

The music changes, and he shifts off to the side as three spotlights create circles on the floor of the stage. My breath catches as I watch Bryanna so bravely walk out onto the floor, and I have no doubt in my mind that she believes this is what she needs to do in order to ensure those she loves remain safe. While I don't know the details of what these bastards are holding over her head, all the intel that came back point to the same patterns these people use to gain control over their victims, and I would bet money that this is exactly what we're dealing with now.

Bryanna has been dressed in a simple, but short as fuck, little white dress, probably intended to emphasize her virginity, and making it almost impossible to focus on the operational aspects of the night.

The bidding starts, and my jaw clenches tightly as the excitement level of the men in the room begins to rise. I'm well-armed with more money than any of these fuckers can even think about having, at least that's what I've been told, and there's not a chance in hell I'm letting any of these vultures claim Bryanna. I can't let them know that, or throw my hand, though. Bryanna's here for a reason, willing to sacrifice herself for that cause, and I'll be damned if I'm the one who puts her family and whatever else she may be protecting at risk.

I bid one or two times on each of the first two girls, just to keep my cover. When the auctioneer starts the bidding for my green-eyed Doll, my heart begins to race. I ease into it slowly, raising my paddle every once in a while, methodically increasing the dollar amount by a million or so at a time, and after we get too high, the other men drop off, and there's only one fucker left bidding against me. He is persistent, and there's no doubt he's our man. I keep the bidding going for a short time with small increases, but after awhile, I've got enough information about the bidding, this slimebag's part in it, the camera in my lapel is probably full, and I just want Bryanna off that goddamn

stage. “Fifteen million dollars,” I call out from the back, raising my paddle high in the air.

A hush goes over the entire room as the crowd waits to see if the bid will be countered, but not one other paddle raises in the air, and the room suddenly quiets for an uncomfortable amount of time until the MC finally proclaims the winner. My opponent, who’s closer to the center of the room, turns to face me. I stand and walk toward the fucker, extending a conciliatory hand as I reach him, and nodding to the two others at his table, who don’t try to disguise the fact that they are sizing me up as I do.

I intend to shake hands with each of them, hopefully peacefully, but I’m prepared for anything, and then make my way to the predesignated winner’s area as the MC instructed at the beginning of the auction. It’s where I’ll pay in cash for Bryanna, she’ll sign paperwork, and we’ll leave this place with enough intel to find my sleazy opponent wherever he lives, trail the fucking trafficking ring, and end Bryanna’s worry for good.

I glance up at the stage, fully intending to see curiosity if not confusion riddling her lovely features as she recognizes me; instead, her green eyes begin to flicker, and with no other warning, Bryanna’s legs buckle beneath her, and she crumples into a pile of arms and legs in the middle of the fucking stage.

I want to run to her, pick her up, make sure she is physically okay and that her breathing is steady, but my opponent, a balding rotund man, finally extends a hand with knobby fingers to me with a wide grin on his face. “I was going to congratulate you, but now I extend my sympathy. What a pitiful little prize you’ve won.”

It takes effort not to go to Bryanna, or to keep my hands from balling into fists, or from sending them flying right into his mouth. “Indeed. This girl is hardly in the condition the auction marketed or assured of us. I hope next time you’ll give me a chance to redeem myself by picking a girl who can at least stay on her feet,” I say, shaking my head and playing the part of a real bastard, while inside my blood is pounding like a fucking freight train.

His head rolls back as he laughs out loud at my vulgar joke. I envision a solid upper cut to his chin. It takes him out and leaves him panting for air on the floor in front of me. My hand tightens, fisting at my side, just itching to heave it.

“You sure you want to throw in the towel so soon? You could always bid on a few of the others they’ll bring out later? The night is early, and I’d even

take this one off your hands while you play,” the bastard says.

“Another night, perhaps. Tonight I have my sights set on making sure these dealers learn a little lesson. The bid I placed was for a consensual virgin. Instead they try to pass off a woman who’s half drugged-out and unconscious on the floor.”

He looks me up and down and nods. “Agreed. I’d be as pissed as you, but just before the bid I heard they added an even younger virgin to the roster for later tonight, and she’s coming home with me. Be a good sport and take care of your winnings,” he says, handing me a card. “Oh, and there’s another party on my yacht in a couple weeks. You won the lady fair and square tonight, my friend, but I want a chance to redeem myself, even if she won’t be a virgin by that time. I always get the woman I want. No one outbids me, and I came halfway around the world especially for her. Consider yourself invited and make sure you show up,” he says.

Chapter 16

Bryanna

The pain in my head is absolutely throbbing, a slow, dull ache that permeates my temple, making it difficult to open my eyelids more than a slight bit at a time. The room is dim, but the little stripe of light filtering from the crack underneath the door causes me to squint back the blinding pain, and my stomach wants to wretch from the effort.

I give myself time before trying to raise my head, but it's no use, my body is too weak, and my head is too heavy to lift from the pillow beneath me.

“Bryanna, time to wake up. Open those pretty green eyes for me.” The deep masculine voice is so familiar, yet so very far away. The heat of a hand grazing my cheek keeps me from falling back into a deep sleep, causing a steady buzz that permeates my senses as I fight to gain consciousness.

I strain to reopen my eyes, and when I do, a firm finger tilts my chin, forcing me to look into the deep blue eyes that are watching me intently. “You gave me quite a scare, Doll.”

My stomach rolls with sudden recognition and memory. Damian! I try to sit up, but my upper body feels like it's weighted down, and as hard as I try, the effort is futile.

He strokes my cheek with his finger. I don't know how he knew where I was, or how he managed to take me away from the auction, but if I'm with him, my niece and nephew have little to no chance of surviving, if they are even still alive.

I manage to push myself up, intending to tell him that I have to get back to the auction, but he clamps a hand over my mouth and glares down at me with intensity. “Listen to me, Bryanna. Tell me whatever you want, but you

do it quietly. They don't have audio or camera in this room, but I don't know who can hear us outside that door. Understand?"

I choke back a sob and nod. "What have you done, Damian? Where are we? We have to go back. You have to take me back to the auction. If you don't, my family will die. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I half whisper, pleading with him to listen this time.

He doesn't answer right away. I push my palms against the steel wall of his chest, but there's no strength behind the motion, and he easily restrains my wrists with one hand. "Stop, Bryanna. The worst is over, Doll," Damian says.

He thinks he can help, or outsmart these people, but he doesn't know how they work or what he's done by taking me. My breathing is starting to come faster and faster, and my heart races as I think about what could be happening at this very moment and what will surely happen if I don't make him turn me over to my captors. "You have to listen to me. If you don't return me, these people will kill my family. Do you understand me? You have to take me back. There is no choice in this."

His grip on my wrists lightens, and his eyes penetrate mine. "Bryanna, the only way that your family is safe is if we take these sons of bitches out. Do you really believe these people will honor a trade they make for you for your family's safety?"

I inhale deeply, trying desperately to stem the flood of tears. "You don't understand. They don't care about anything except selling me to the man in the auction who came for me. They'll come after me as soon as they realize I'm gone, and he didn't get what he wants. They will want their money from him!"

"You were bought, and they will receive their money regardless of who purchased you, and we will deal with the rest. We have to get you out of here," Damian whispers, stroking my cheek.

I hear him, but it takes time to sink in. The tears prick behind my eyes, and I try my best to stem the tide, but it's absolutely no use. They cascade down my cheeks, and I raise my hand to wipe them, but he is way too quick. "They're not ever going to touch you," Damian says, wiping the tears that have filled my eyes and are hurriedly spilling down my face.

"Damian, I know who you are. You work for Brian Carrington, and he may have money, but these people are incredibly rich, and where the hell are we?" I ask, looking around the room which has four white walls and not one

window.

His eyebrows raise, and his deep blue eyes take on a look of amusement. “You ask a lot of questions and know more than you should. Come on, up you go. We were lucky enough to find a room in the club, but we need to get you to the car.” Damian scoops me into his arms and gently places me on my feet.

“Ready?” Damian asks, taking my hand and guiding me out of the room and down a short hall to an exit sign. It can’t be this easy to walk away from the people who abducted me, because it is a huge network, and they know where my family lives.

As soon as the door opens and the fresh air hits my face, my heart starts racing, slowly at first and then faster, and each second that passes causes my anxiety to grow until my feet dig into the ground beneath me. There is no way, after all that my captors have gone through to secure me, that they will just let me or my family go like this. “You don’t understand. I can’t go with you.”

Damian’s eyebrows raise in question as he takes my wrists in his hand. “I understand completely, and you’re still coming with me.”

The thought of my niece and nephew tortured like these men threatened is more than I can take. “You can’t hold me against my will! What if I want to stay here?” I ask, even as he scoops me into his arms and smothers me tight against his chest.

If he gets me into that car it’s all over. He still doesn’t understand. This isn’t about me. He thinks he’s saved me, but he doesn’t know that by taking me he’s not only killed me, but my entire family. The men who grabbed me promised me to a certain man, and Damian is not that man, and they know exactly where my niece and nephew live; they’ve shown me the proof. They know where they go to preschool, where they go to the doctor, and where my mom lives and cares for them.

I can’t control the tears that fall. I’ve heard from my aunt how these security men work. Whatever it takes to get the job done, but Damian hasn’t ever met the lepers who want to sell me to a man rumored to have more money than anyone on earth. The one who pays people to threaten me with the most horrific torture of my family in order to bed a virgin of his choice.

Damian’s hold is so tight I can barely move. I do the only thing possible, trying to grasp his chest in my teeth, anything to loosen his hold, but his arms only tighten like iron around me. “You bite me, Bryanna, and I’m going to

spank your ass so hard you won't be able to sit for a week," Damian says, squeezing me against him even harder.

I squirm, struggling to get free, trying to yell at the top of my lungs, but it is no use. Damian is too strong and keeps me pressed tightly against the rock-hard wall of his chest. "Scream all you want, Doll, but you're still coming home with me. Settle down and quit fighting me, and your first spanking will go much easier."

Damian lowers me into a car, and as much as I squirm to get free, he's too strong to overcome. He settles me into his lap, and the car door to the left of us closes. Only when a sequence of locks in the car engage, and the driver pulls away from the entrance does his hold on me loosen, but barely. He turns to me and tilts my chin upward so that I have no choice but to either close my eyes or look into the ones gazing down at me as the vehicle begins to move. "I will explain all of this to you when we get out of here. Until then, you're going to behave yourself while we get through these gates. When we get closer, I'm going to pull you into my arms and act like I'm kissing you. Pretend like you're enjoying it so our men can get us out of here. Understand, Doll?" Damian says in that husky voice of his.

I should not trust anyone, absolutely no one, but Damian has kept me safe, and he's had so many chances to hurt me, and he hasn't. He's given me so many assurances that he will keep my family safe. I've heard the stories about these bodyguards from my aunt, how extremely courageous they are, and I want to believe so very badly, but my mind just can't shut down the fear.

"Trust me, Bryanna. You and your family are safe."

Something about the way Damian says it, in absolute control, while he keeps me pressed so close that I can feel the heat of his skin through the material of his clothes, penetrates the side of my brain that acknowledges just how attracted to him I am, and just how exciting it is to be in his arms, and just how courageous he is. "I'm not an actress. If you want me to enjoy it, you should actually kiss me instead of pretending."

Damian's eyebrows raise, and his hand snakes out, grasps the back of my neck, and pulls me close, so close that I can feel the warmth of his breath against my own. "You don't want to test me, Bryanna."

The raspiness of his voice sends shivers of excitement down my spine. I shouldn't be so attracted to him, but the way he looks at me, calls me Doll, and threatens to take me over his knee sets every neuron in my body alive

with unleashed need.

“Yes, I do.”

Damian’s eyes flash, and he holds me firm while capturing my lips. The warmth of his hot-blooded kiss sends shivers down my spine and leaves me breathless, panting against him while he devours me. When he’s made his point, he doesn’t end the kiss quickly; instead, he licks along my lips, continuing to explore, coaxing my lips to part for him, and a wave of unbridled desire and heat course through my body and straight to my center. The scent of his skin permeates all of my senses, and I breathe it in deeply, completely overwhelmed by just how attracted I am to this man.

Damian explores deeply, his tongue tangling in a seductive dance with my own, until I find it incredibly hard to breathe. When he finally lets me go, it’s long past the time we’ve passed the gates. He caresses my cheek, a flicker of emotion passing over his features as he continues to watch me.

I can feel the heat of my cheeks and try to broach a topic of some sense of normalness. “If the man responsible for this isn’t dead or behind bars, I need to go back. You know that.”

Damian’s deep blue eyes don’t waver. “Bryanna, you’re completely safe. Look at me,” he says, grasping my chin. “We are working extremely hard to ensure that your family is safe.”

I glance up, but he must see the concern, the doubt, and the fear to actually let go and trust someone to take the reins with the lives of my family. He runs his finger down my cheek. “Trust me, Doll.”

“I do trust you, but you know as well as I do that they’ll come for me.”

Chapter 17

Damian

Bryanna's deep green eyes settle on mine, still hazy with desire, but still questioning and wary, and all I want to do is wipe the deep creases of worry from her beautiful face.

I try to constrain myself, but the desire to touch and calm Bryanna's anxiety is an almost overpowering need, a feeling that I've never had with any other woman. A need to protect her that supersedes all the jobs I've ever had before. My finger reaches out and strokes her smooth skin, sliding down the length of her high cheekbones and trailing to the taut, delicate creaminess of her neck. The feel of her pulse beating against my hand, while her eyes dilate as she looks at me causes my cock to push uncomfortably against my trousers.

She nestles into my touch, and my hand automatically snakes around her neck, pulling her closer. Her breath is wispy and warm against my skin, and the little moan she lets out when I pull her tight sends a thrill of possession through my entire body.

"No one touches you or your family, understand, Doll?" I say, stroking the seam of her lip with the tip of my finger.

Her breathing shallows, her cheeks flush a beautiful pink, and her already wide eyes continue to haze over with desire. She's the most gorgeous female I've ever seen, but I can't focus on that right now. Instead, I need to make sure she and her family are safe, and in order to do that, we need to find the fucker who invited me to his party, fast.

I barely noticed as we passed through the gates, and if they caught us on camera, we were doing exactly what they would have expected any red-blooded male to be doing with a woman who he had just purchased for

fifteen million dollars.

Evers navigates the long drive after passing through the gates, and guns the car hard. He knows exactly where we're going and wants to make sure we aren't tailed. I have no concern with his driving abilities. I've been partnered with him many times, but Bryanna's body is pressed firmly against mine and is shaking, most likely from the drugs coming out of her system and the events of the night, but this isn't helping.

I slide out of my jacket and pull her closer, draping it over her trembling frame. "Look at me," I say, grasping her chin so that she has no other option but to do as I've asked. "You stop worrying. We're dealing with this," I say as Evers hits the blacktop of the main road and gives it more gas. Everything has to come together soon. The photos are already uploading to our intel team, and they'll work around the clock to find out exactly who we're dealing with.

Bryanna nuzzles into my side, but her trembling hasn't subsided.

I pull her tighter against me as Evers barrels down the highway, and glance down at her while she blinks valiantly, trying to keep her eyes from closing. The trauma of the day and all the drugs are just too much for her. I put my arm around her shoulder. "Sleep, Doll, we'll be home soon," I say, thankful she's safely in my arms and her family is tucked away, but restless with the knowledge that this is far from over until we put my bidding opponent away.

Bryanna can't continue to fight her fatigue, and before long her eyes completely close. I watch as she slips deeper into an exhausted sleep and her entire body begins to relax. I push a stray strand of hair from her face and allow myself a few moments to take in her beauty, gazing at the graceful heart-shaped face and the delicate lips that I've seen in my dreams night after night, doing things I shouldn't even be considering.

The attraction I feel for Bryanna is like nothing I've ever felt. It's an almost primal need to keep her protected and safe and to... I stop my train of thought because I shouldn't be indulging in fantasies about Bryanna, and I most definitely shouldn't have kissed her. I've made it a strict rule never to mix business with pleasure, never, and she's so damn young. Still in her last year of college, hasn't even had time to enjoy all the world has to offer, but the way she feels against me, her heart beating against my side and the warmth of her breath on my chest is more than exhilarating. I know for damn sure that it's not going to be as easy as just following my rules to let her go.

This isn't just a physical attraction; I already know this goes far beyond that.

I glance out at the scenery and ask Evers how much longer it will be until our inevitable car switch; a protocol we have in place to ensure we can detect anyone who may be following us. I know these bastards have the car on camera from when we passed through the gates, and while they may not come after us right away, we can never be too sure.

"A few minutes up the road; we'll be veering off shortly," Evers says, glancing at me in the rearview.

We usually switch drivers too, just to be safe, but I don't want to leave Bryanna alone. "Excellent, can you do me a favor and see if one of the guys can ride with us? I'll take care of Bryanna," I say.

"Roger that," Evers says, his lips curling up at the edges as he tries to keep from smiling at me in the rearview mirror. He calls in my request through the overhead.

Nick answers back. "I'll ride along. We have plenty of men in the woods and covering the transport. Did she get hurt?" he asks.

"Uh, nothing like that. The drugs are still wearing off, and she's sleeping. Think Dame just wants to make sure her breathing stays even," Evers says, his eyes alight with amusement as he sneaks another glance at me.

I can't help but smile and give him a chin nod of thanks for keeping those jokers off my back. The last thing I need right now when I'm trying to deal with my own feelings is them heckling me about Bryanna.

They know I'm a loner, I don't do girlfriends, I don't do attachments, but here the fuck I sit with this woman who has consumed every damn thought since I first saw her picture, and she's nestled in my arms, exactly where I want her to be.

Evers keeps his foot on the floor, and we careen past a few more miles, and then slow for a sharp right that takes us onto a back road. He ignores the orange *private property—do not enter* signs that line the fence on both banks of the road. The narrow road splits off ahead, and Evers takes the dirt path that leads us through swampy marsh and overgrown forest until we emerge into a small clearing by a pond.

Nick and Cole jump out of the side door of a white Town and Country van. "I'll carry her if you want to get your stuff," Cole says. "I can drive with Evers, and Nick can travel with you and Bryanna.

"I've got Bryanna, if you don't mind grabbing my stuff," I say, ignoring his offer to carry my Doll. I open the door before scooping her into my arms,

sliding out, and walking with her in my arms toward the van. I don't miss the raised-eyebrow gesture that Cole throws to Nick, but to his credit he doesn't say a word, just closes the sliding passenger door after I get the two of us settled into the back, while Nick jumps into the driver's seat.

Bryanna remains sleeping as we make our way down the dirt path, around the pond, until we reach a paved road at the opposite side of the property. After a short while it merges with a blacktop road, and in less than ten minutes of winding through country roads, Nick navigates us onto the highway again.

Bryanna is comfortably sprawled beside me, her head nestled on my thigh. I pull the blanket, which is draped against the back of the seat, over her slight frame, pushing the hair that has fallen into her face away. She is so lovely that it's hard to look away, but I have work to do if we're going to keep her and her family safe, and that's what I need to focus on.

"Anyone following us?" I ask Nick, knowing that not seeing anyone to this point is no assurance that they haven't been.

"We've had a team surveilling the place, and no cars have left in pursuit, and our aerial team hasn't picked up anything either, but we both know that could just be to throw us into a state of complacency. We'll continue to follow protocol, and if intel doesn't track a tail on us, we'll stay in New Orleans until you get info on your guy, and take the jet when you're ready to head back to Chicago, courtesy of Brian," Nick says.

Brian Carrington, the most successful steel magnate, controls one of the most sought-after resources in the world. He does it with humility and a passion to ensure little businesses across the globe are taken in under the Carrington umbrella, and that employees and their families are well cared for. A man that has more money than he will ever know what to do with, and yet one of the most compassionate men alive. He and Chase Prestian, both equally wealthy and powerful, are the sole investors in our security company, so this mission is more than personal. Brian has entrusted us with finding the love of his life's niece, and bringing her back safely is exactly what I intend to do.

"Did you get any word on the images of the men from the club? I've got a couple descriptions that I can give you, if we want to run through those while Bryanna sleeps. She may be able to give us more detail a little later," I say to Nick.

"Nothing yet, but we also sent them to Marenah and her team in the

trafficking division.”

I only nod; this isn't going to be as clean as some of the other jobs we've had. The fuckers who were in that club are loaded beyond comprehension. These men throw millions of dollars around like they were ten-dollar bills, and they buy women to do with them as they please, and the man with more money than any of them still wants Bryanna.

Men like that don't stop. If I don't take him up on his invitation, he'll come for her and the man who bested him; it's just a matter of when and where. If we have a chance in hell of learning his identity, it will be through our intel team, coupled with Marenah and the new trafficking division she put together. When Matt fell for the lovely blonde Russian, no one knew at the time that it would send our team plunging into a world of uncovering trafficking victims. She was on a mission when Matt first met her, and she stole his heart the moment he saw her. It was never going to end in any other way than the entire security team getting behind her passion to save women from that plight.

She and her team are excellent at what they do, and I have no doubt they'll turn up information on names and the locations of the men in that goddamn club. The memory of personally learning just how women are sold to the highest bidder is something I'll never forget, and I will do everything in my power to ensure these men are taken down and that they can no longer grab innocent girls for their warped sense of pleasure.

We're nearing the area where we're staying in New Orleans and still haven't heard back from intel. “Our team is the best in the business, and they haven't come up with squat, even on facial recognition. What the fuck is up with that, Nick? The mask he had on was small; it's not like he was trying to hide. The name of his goddamn yacht was on the back of the card I sent a picture of. The software should have a cross-referenced match somewhere, yet our entire intel team can't get a lock on the guy? What gives?”

“I know, Damian, and Marenah's not sure why he's not popping up either, but she and her team are working on it. They're all busting their asses to figure it out. We'll hear back from one of our divisions soon. It hasn't been that long, let's just hang tight.”

I'm usually the voice of reason, but I'm learning quickly that I'm not as calm and collected when my green-eyed Doll's safety is at risk. “Roger that, Nick. You got to know Marenah better than most of us while you were taking care of her. You really think she and her division are going to get a lock on

this guy?" I ask.

He turns in his seat and smiles at me as we pull up to the sky-rise we're staying at. "You don't know her like I do. That woman is a little wildcat! Matt has his hands full with her! Marenah isn't going to stop until she finds our man. You heard the story about how she led the charge to get an entire boatload of people to safety after they had been abducted?"

"Little pieces, but I was working on a different assignment."

"Yeah, well, anyone finds him other than our intel, it will be her. We'll be ready to go once they get a lock on him. Stop worrying," Nick says.

I nod. At no time in our past have we gone in on a target we don't have specific intel on. This is a first, but there was no other way to get Bryanna out alive before she was sold to a man who would have condemned her to a life of sex slavery or worse. I pull out my cell and hit Brian Carrington's phone number. It's time that he knows while we have Bryanna, we also have an opponent worthy of his billions, who still has a very deep and dark desire to buy Bryanna at any price, and his threat if I don't show up at his yacht was heard loud and clear.

Chapter 18

Bryanna

I hear talking and can't make out the words, but would recognize that deep, velvety voice anywhere. I struggle to open my eyes against the light streaming in through the blinds, and finally I do, but slowly, struggling against the effort to keep them from re-closing. I nuzzle under the covers and pull the pillow lying next to me closer, inhaling Damian's scent. The one that triggers all of my senses and causes my center to clench with desire. I lie still, taking in the surroundings and listening to the voices outside the closed door. They are too muffled to comprehend, but then Damian's voice raises sharply, and then there is nothing but quiet until a click of a closing door sounds in the distance.

I pull his pillow tighter, letting his scent wash over me and calm me, even if just for a short while. Damian came for me, he bid on me, won me, and got me out of that auction. He's saved me from those evil men not only once, but twice, and he calls me Doll, and he kissed me like he wanted to, and damn it if my heart doesn't race faster every single time he's near.

As if conjured from my thoughts, the door opens. Damian's impressive frame stands in the doorway. He's wearing jeans with a black t-shirt that shows off his rippling muscles and corded forearms, the ones I've felt holding me tightly against his maleness. His blue eyes are riveted on my own, fierce and intense, and I can only imagine how angry he is that I ran, and he had to chase me down, yet again.

Damian comes to stand right next to the empty side of the bed. His eyebrows raise as he takes in the pillow that I'm still snuggled up with.

I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment, but I can't come up with an excuse. His eyes have gone from fierce to deep and dark blue globes of

swirling emotion. “I’m sorry I took off. I know I made your job harder, but I keep trying to tell you. I have to...”

“Shh, it’s okay, Doll,” Damian says, leaning onto the bed with his knee, caressing my cheek with a finger.

The way he talks to me and touches me makes everything south clench with anticipation and need, but I try to swallow the desire. I need him to understand that as much as I want his help, wish it were enough, it’s not going to be. I need to find a way back to the auction that won’t end in him following me back there. Otherwise, this is bound to be another dangerous repeat, one that could end in my family’s demise.

Brian wouldn’t have anyone but the people of the highest caliber working for him, and I can sense what a good man Damian is. He has put up with enough of my issues and deserves an apology and the truth. “I’m sorry I took off without talking to you the last time. You rescued me, and in return I stole from you, left, and caused you even more trouble. I don’t want to do that to you again, Damian, but you have to know that I can’t stay. There’s too much riding on this.”

“You’re not telling me anything that I don’t already know, Doll. Tell me what they’ve threatened you with, Bryanna. I’m pretty sure I already know, but I’d like to hear it from you.” Damian strokes my cheek with his finger.

My heart beats faster, and I want to tell him, but I can’t risk the lives of my niece and nephew or my mom who has been taking care of them so much of the time. “I know you’re trying to help, and I appreciate that, but what you won’t seem to understand is that it will put my family at an even greater risk. I can’t chance that, Damian. You might think that Brian has enough money to get the best of these people, but they have an entire industry, backed by sick people who are perhaps just as rich, if not richer than Brian. They aren’t going to give up. What they want, they get.”

Damian’s hand snakes around my back, and he helps me sit up. “Look at me, Bryanna,” he says, tilting my chin so that I do as he asks. “We had your family taken to safety well before you went on that stage. We have a plan in place to mitigate the risks to your family, all of them. Believe me, we wouldn’t put them in danger. We have eyes on them twenty-four seven,” Damian says, gazing at me with those intense eyes as he strokes my cheek.

“Are you serious? My niece and nephew and my mom too? Where are they?” I ask, pushing myself against the headboard and bringing the quilted coverlet up to my chin.

He narrows his eyes at me. “I certainly wouldn’t tell you something if it wasn’t true. They’re all doing fine and being protected. Your mom is handling things well, but she’s worried about you. We’ll let you see your family soon, but you’ll stay with me for a few days while we get a few of the details worked out. We need to find the man who wanted to purchase you. Can I trust you to stay here, Doll, or will you try to take off again?” Damian asks, smirking at me with that upturned lip.

“They’re really all safe?” I ask, glancing down at the twisted sheet I’ve managed to bundle up around my fists.

Damian’s gaze follows mine, and he covers my hands with his own, gently prying my fingers from around the material and lacing them with his. “I would never lie to you, Bryanna. We’ll give them a call a bit later. Right now, I want you to get freshened up and then eat something while my team gets a few security devices in place, okay?”

I nod, aware of the electricity that exudes from his fingers through to my own, causing my body to thrum, heating me with that same tingling excitement I feel every time he’s near.

His lips turn up into a wide curved smile.

“What’s so funny?”

“I think this might be the first time you’ve ever agreed to anything without an argument or a plan to escape and defy me.”

He has been so very kind, and all I’ve done is give him attitude and more trouble. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know what to do. My family means the world to me, and what they threatened to do to them was vile.”

“They won’t be able to make good on their threats. We’ve gotten through the worst, but we need to get a lock on this guy and still have a few things to wrap up.”

“Do you know what they threatened me with?”

His eyes go dark, and he releases my hands. As soon as he does, I miss his touch, the warmth that his fingers curled around mine brought, and that delicious little tingle.

He traces his fingertip along the side of my cheek and strokes downward gently until he reaches my lips. “Look at me, Doll,” Damian says, and at the sound of that velvety, commanding voice, my thighs press together with pent-up desire.

I swallow back the feeling of remorse that I ever mistrusted him and glance up slowly. His finger strokes underneath my chin, and he lifts my

face, inch by inch, until his eyes capture mine with his own. “I didn’t know exactly what they threatened you with at the time, Bryanna, but I knew the type, and it wasn’t difficult to figure out that they were holding your family over your head.”

“They’re not going to stop.”

His eyes narrow. “You let me deal with this now. The worry of your family’s safety belongs to me, and you have my word that they will remain safe.”

I try to be strong and fight to hold back the tears of relief that threaten. He touches me with his finger, sending electric currents buzzing through my senses. “Look at me, Bryanna. No more secrets,” Damian says, stroking my chin and then tracing along the seam of my lips with his finger.

The tone of his authoritarian voice sends a stream of desire straight to my center, and his touch sends heat against the skin of my body, and it travels straight to my sex. I want to tell him how much I appreciate everything that he and his team are doing, say something profound, but I don’t quite know how to express the sheer gratitude that I’m feeling right now. “Thank you so much, Damian,” I say, swallowing as my voice cracks.

He gestures toward the bathroom with a nod. “Go get a shower, Doll. There’s a bathrobe behind the door that you can use. Make yourself at home, and meet me at the table for breakfast when you’re finished.”

Chapter 19

Damian

It is with extreme difficulty that I pull myself away from Bryanna's gaze, making my way to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee and scrounge around in the refrigerator. The drive back into the city after ensuring we weren't being followed last night was relatively quick and uneventful. While Bryanna slept most of the way home and straight through the night, I was up with intel to get a lock on these fuckers, in between just watching her breathe and restlessly tossing and turning all night long.

I pull out an oblong glass dish covered with aluminum foil, peek under its cover, and smile widely. Gaby, who's more like a mother than a house manager to most of our team, never ceases to amaze us with her ability to keep everyone well stocked. She's made my favorite, French toast casserole with peaches. I dish up two plates, heat them in the oven, and wash some fruit while the coffee brews. I'm just drizzling maple syrup over the warmed meal when the shower in the bathroom turns off.

I place breakfast on the table and pour two steaming cups of the coffee that Chase routinely has sent over from Brazil for himself and the entire team of security guards. I try to focus on something else, but it's hard not to imagine how Bryanna looks drying that lush little body of hers with one of my towels in the very next room.

I'd like to help her with that little task. I'd like to use my tongue to lick every single drop of water from her creamy and delectable skin. The door opens, and I push a quick hand against my cock in an attempt to rearrange, just before she pads into the small dining area of the VIP hotel suite wearing one of my t-shirts that just barely hits her thighs.

"Here, take a seat, and let's eat something while it's still warm," I say,

pulling out Bryanna's chair while trying not to ogle the exposed, creamy skin of her toned thighs. Bryanna attempts to pull the t-shirt down as she gets situated. My glance falls to her dainty ankles and pink-colored toenails, which doesn't help my cause even slightly, because now all I can think about is having her wrap those ankles around my neck as I nuzzle into her pussy.

"I didn't add creamer yet. We have a variety and some flavored syrups, if you like," I offer.

"Hmm. You wouldn't happen to have vanilla, would you?" Bryanna's pink tongue touches the tip of her lips, and her eyes sparkle with anticipation, making me hope to hell that Gaby's stocked that particular flavor in the fridge.

"You're in luck. Vanilla, mocha, and hazelnut are all options," I say, placing the containers of creamer in front of her.

She pours some of the vanilla into her cup and then stirs it, then adds a little more.

I raise my eyebrows, and she grins at me. "Hmm, creamy heaven," Bryanna says, and the thought of her drinking cream just sends me back to thoughts of her in my bed.

Bryanna inhales her concoction and murmurs her appreciation of the first sip. Her delighted smile makes me wish I could keep her blissfully tucked away from everything that is happening, but unfortunately we need information, and she may be able to recall certain things that we would miss otherwise. "I need to get a few details about exactly how you were abducted. We can talk about it now or a little later, but it needs to be relatively soon," I say gently, wishing I could get the information a different way, instead of making her relive things she may just as soon want to forget.

Her green eyes watch me intently for a moment, contemplating my question over her mug. "Would it be too presumptuous to ask if we can talk to my family before I go sharing all the details with you? I know you say they're okay, and I do trust you, but... It's just that they're all I have in the world, Damian. I need to be sure."

Bryanna's face is so expressive. She's embarrassed, thinks she's hurting my feelings by asking, when in fact she couldn't have pleased me more. She is an astute young lady, and as her security counsel I would have advised her to do that very thing.

I give her a bright smile. "I'm pretty sure that can be arranged. Let's finish breakfast, get dressed, and then we'll give them a call before we talk."

Bryanna's smile is infectious. She visibly relaxes and almost inhales her breakfast after that.

"Would you like some more?" I ask when she's finished, reaching across the table to wipe a small dot of peach from her lips.

Her cheeks pinken a perfect rosy color at the intimate gesture. I lick the peach off my finger and delight in the way her pupils widen as she watches. She is absolutely perfect, so responsive, and I realize at this very moment that this is going to happen. Today may not be the day, but she and I are going to happen. The chemistry and sexual energy between us is too strong to ignore, and it has been that way long before our kiss.

"Damian." She interrupts my thoughts, and I revert my attention back to her, aware I've missed half of her sentence. "Typical man! Did you even hear what I asked?" she huffs playfully.

"Typical man, huh?" I chuckle inwardly at her sass. Not so much, but she's sparked a strong desire to teach her just what kind of man I am. "I heard enough, something about nothing to wear. I sent out for some clothes last night. They should be here shortly, so there's plenty of time to eat a little more," I say, standing to plate her another small slice of the French toast.

Her eyes go wide. "Hmm, I'm impressed. It didn't look like you were listening to a word I said," she defends.

"I was half listening, just having a hard time concentrating on your mouth when everything else looks so delectable," I say, earning me a widened mouth and an instant beautiful coloring of pink to her cheeks. She doesn't say a word, just looks at me with those watchful green eyes of hers.

"If you're waiting for me to apologize for being so forward, I can't. It's not every day someone as beautiful as you is sitting across the dining room table half-dressed. It's incredibly hard to concentrate on anything else right now."

Bryanna's tongue comes out and runs along the seam of her lip, and damn if that's not exactly what I want to do with my own. I watch as it skims her delicate moist flesh before disappearing between those supple lips. Her cheeks are still singed with embarrassment, and the color makes my cock turn hard. I think for a moment she's not going to respond, but then that lovely little mouth parts.

"Thank you," she says on a breath.

"You're most welcome, Bryanna," I say, just before the doorbell rings. "Finish your breakfast while it's still warm, and I'll see if those are your

clothes.”

At the door, the delivery man hands me the package. I hastily sign for the contents, anxious to see if she likes my selection. When I enter the kitchen, she has her back to me and is cleaning up by the sink. She bends to place the dishes in the dishwasher, and the back of her t-shirt rises, and I catch the slight curve of her muscular bottom cheeks. Damn, she’s hot.

I clear my throat, letting her know I’ve returned, and lay her clothes on the now-cleared table, slitting through the tape with the slice end of my multi-tool. I pull the first plastic-covered sweater out of the box.

“It’s lovely, may I?” Bryanna says softly, coming to stand next to me.

Something about the way she asks my permission, and the softness of her tone calls to my dominant and protective side. “Of course, Doll. Open that while I get the rest of them out,” I say, pulling a couple more sweaters, two pairs of jeans, and three skirts out of the box, all wrapped in delicate tissue and protected with plastic.

“Oh, it’s so soft and luxurious. Damian, thank you. You didn’t need to go to such expense, but they are absolutely gorgeous,” Bryanna says, starting to unwrap the others as she speaks.

“I thought they may suit you,” I say, observing her expression as she watches me open another package. I hold up one of the lace-trimmed panties that I’ve selected for her, with matching bras.

Her breathing audibly changes, and the sound makes my dick twitch. Damn, she has the most extraordinary effect on me. Just the change in her breathing gets me hard.

“You bought me undergarments,” Bryanna says, fingering the delicate lace of the soft pink material.

“Well, most people are used to wearing them, and I wanted you to be comfortable for the next few days.” I didn’t lie. That is why I bought them, but the truth is that I would much rather put all the clothes back in the box and have her dressed only in her creamy, delectable skin for the next few days.

“They’re beautiful. I appreciate everything you did to get me home and make me comfortable. I’m so sorry I ran from you and didn’t trust you,” Bryanna says, looking up at me with those expressive deep green eyes.

I want to tell her it’s all over, that she doesn’t have a thing to worry about, but even though we have safeguarded her and her family, she and I both know we need to get to the man who wants her for his own, so I avoid it

all together. “I had them pack a little overnight case with toiletries for you. Get ready for the day, and then we’ll give your mom a call, okay,” I say, wanting to distract her from her worry and unable to resist my finger reaching out to caress her cheek.

“Okay, Damian.”

The sound of my name on her lips is almost my undoing. I keep myself in check instead of grasping her to me and claiming those lips for my very own, but just barely. “Go, Bryanna.”

She gathers the items and takes them with her. I watch as her hips sway in my old t-shirt, and don’t take my eyes off her until she’s out of sight before letting out a breath of my own. Damn if she isn’t the most alluring woman I’ve ever met.

I check my phone and read a message from Matt letting me know intel has a lead on the man at the auction and that they’ll send over a dossier within a half hour. Better that I not read it and spoil my good mood until I’ve let her speak with her family. I send a note to Nate, who’s running security for her family at one of our safe houses, to give me another update on her mom.

They’re good. Playing puzzles and drinking cocoa.

Any word on her brother?

Her mother is a very good caregiver for her niece and nephew, unlike Bryanna’s no-good brother, who, from initial reports and my own research, has been very little part of the kids’ lives at all the last few years. Flitting in from time to time, he visits, gives them gifts, and then just as abruptly returns to drugging and running. They’re far better off without him, but the thought of two sweet kids growing up without a father figure is just plain sad.

Dame, you better give me a call.

I hit Cole’s number, and he answers on the first ring. “We’ve got trouble. Bryanna’s brother’s on his way home. He may not be the greatest dad in the world, but if his entire family has just suddenly disappeared, he’s bound to send red flags to the police.”

Chapter 20

Bryanna

I finger the lace of the pale pink panties before sliding them on. Just the thought that Damian picked them out for me does something absolutely delicious to my insides. I can't help but smile at the memory of his comments. Maybe he flirts with all the women, but a part of me really wants to believe that he's as attracted to me as I am to him.

I pull the sweater on over the luxurious push-up bra he's purchased for me and glance in the mirror, running my hands over the cashmere. Never in my life have I owned something as nice as this. All the money usually goes to school loans, rent, and splurging a little bit for the kids. I slide into the jeans and turn to admire the perfect fit in the mirror.

I twirl one more time and suddenly stop on my toes, remembering my aunt's rent. I count on my fingers, adding up the days in total. I think it's been three weeks since I was taken, but I can't be sure how long I was unconscious when they first grabbed me. Aunt Jenny is such a sweetheart, and I know she won't be concerned about late rent, but I make a mental note to get even with her, although it will probably take a while. She has always been so generous, sending tons of money home to Mom to take care of all of us, and I know she's the only reason that Damian was sent for me too.

It's his job. He was hired to find me, to take care of me, and bring me home. A job that he's probably being paid an astronomical amount of money to do, and for all I know, the clothes I'm wearing are probably courtesy of Brian too. I face the mirror and put my hands on my hips. "Remember that, Bryanna Foster!"

Damian can have any woman he wants. Worldly women who know what men like, who have made something of themselves professionally, who are

polished and well dressed and don't come with all this baggage. Why would he want to get involved, even peripherally, with an inexperienced college student like me? I slip into the loafers at the bottom of the box, grab the toiletry case, and head to the bathroom to brush my teeth again and fix my face. No more feeling sappy, and absolutely no more crushing on the hunky bodyguard!

I head down the hall and find him scowling as he types onto his cell before glancing up at me as I approach. He barely acknowledges me as his phone beeps, and he begins furiously typing again. I watch him, and when he stops, he looks up again. "Take a seat; we need to talk, Bryanna."

That commanding tone sends a shot right through my core, but the look on his face is serious and anything but warm and friendly. The fierce, demanding Damian is even hotter than the D/s videos I've watched. Sexy and demanding. Holy hell. I control my desire to just sink to the floor like the submissives do in the videos I watch.

He clears his throat.

I nod; if I even open my mouth, some foolhardy thing like sir is going to pop right the hell out, and I don't want to embarrass myself even further. I take a seat on the couch, and he slides into the recliner across from me, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, all the while still glancing at his phone.

"I thought we could wait until after we talked to your mom, but it looks like we're going to need to do this now. I'm going to ask you very personal questions, and you might want to forget it ever happened, but one or more of your memories may be critical in finding out who orchestrated the effort to abduct you, so don't leave anything out."

I'll tell him whatever he wants to know as long he protects my family. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm tougher than I look. You ask the questions, and I'll answer. I don't have anything to hide, and you have a job to do. The sooner we get this all done and over with, the sooner we can both return to our lives."

His eyebrows raise, and the stern look he gives me sends a jolt through my center. "I'll give the direction, you follow my lead, and we'll talk about the rest in time."

"Okay." I don't know what's so important all of a sudden, but it's clearly top of mind to him.

"You moved into your Aunt Jenny's house after she moved in with Brian.

You had a boyfriend at that time. We ran a check on him, and he transferred to Southern California before the beginning of the semester. What happened?"

It's my turn to narrow my eyes at him. He's seriously going to ask me about my previous relationships too? "I don't really think that my ex-boyfriend and our relationship has anything to do with this," I hedge.

"You let me be the judge of that. I need to know the facts and every detail you can remember about the breakup, and anything else that happened during that time will help. It wasn't long after you went separate ways that you were taken. In my book, that makes him a prime suspect, and I'm sure the police would feel the same."

"Whoa! No, you've got it all wrong, Damian. Chad is not and would never be a part of something so vile. He cared about me."

"Tell me what happened," Damian instructs, not budging an inch, his eyes laser focused, almost challenging me not to respond.

"Fine!" I huff.

"If you don't want your ass flipped over my knee, you'll watch your attitude, Doll. For now, I want the truth, and for the record, the word fine should be removed from your vocabulary going forward."

"Fi—"

He narrows his eyes at me and doesn't need to say another word.

"Okay, I'll tell you. We had been dating for a few months before Aunt Jenny decided to rent out her old home. She went through a rough time in that house and wanted to get away from the memories. It was close to college, and she told me I could live there rent-free. Chad and I were both looking at different living options at the time, and as you can imagine, rent is exceptionally high around that area. It just seemed logical to move in together and each put a bit toward rent. She didn't really want the money, but it made both of us feel better to at least contribute, and it was way cheaper than each of us going it alone or paying for on-campus residency."

"So it was for convenience and not the relationship," Damian asks, his eyes intently focused on me.

"You should be working for the FBI as an interrogator. You're making me nervous, questioning me like that."

"Answer the question, Bryanna, and be mindful of your response."

Holy hell, he's bossy! I lick the dryness from my lips, and his eyes track my movement.

“I need to know details in order to put everything together, and we don’t have the luxury of time.”

Clearly I’m going to have to tell him everything if he’s going to clear my ex-boyfriend from his list of suspects. I shrug. “Okay, you want the long and sordid details?”

His raised eyebrows tell me he didn’t like that answer any better than the word fine, so I try not to push my luck any further than I have. “We were actually friends for quite awhile before we started to date.” I don’t even know how to explain this. The recollection alone is enough to bring back all the embarrassment of the night. I’m lost in my thoughts when I hear his voice.

“Bryanna, keep going. I need to know everything, Doll.”

I turn toward his voice, and his eyes haven’t wavered from mine. He nods, encouraging, but I look away. “We had a special night planned to, um, consummate the fact that we took the next step and moved in together, but we didn’t go through with it. Let’s just say it didn’t feel right to me.”

“Bryanna, I know it’s intrusive, but what exactly made you feel that way?”

This is something I never thought I would be talking about, and certainly not with a man this handsome and someone I’m so attracted to.

He’s waiting, and the fact that he’s not just going to go away is obvious in the way those deep blue eyes are watching me so intently.

I might as well just rip the bandage off instead of stretching out the pain. “It was like he was waiting for me to say or do something. I wanted him to take the reins, tell me what to do, how to do it, you know? I don’t know how to explain it other than it didn’t feel right. I couldn’t go through with it. Long story short, we ended up being roommates. He used one room; I used the other. He wanted more, and I didn’t, and when the semester ended, I wasn’t surprised that he moved back to SoCal, where his family lives.”

“That explains how you were being marketed as a virgin. Are you?”

“Oh my god! Damian, this is seriously not something I want to discuss!”

“It’s important. I would never ask you personal questions under the guise of the job. The questions are necessary. I need to know what happened, to ensure we put an end to this for you and your family. Understand?”

“All right, I’m a virgin, okay? The marketing guys for the auction had it right. Somehow they found out I was a virgin, and that’s the only reason I wasn’t raped or pimped out while they held me captive. They had to keep me pure to sell me at the auction,” I say, and all of a sudden the emotions and

distress that I've kept at bay for weeks come flooding to the forefront, and my tears spill faster than I can wipe them.

In a few quick steps, he's moved from the recliner and is sitting next to me, wiping my tears with his fingers. "Bryanna, listen to me. I know this is hard, but someone had to learn that you were a virgin in order to market you that way. Who else knew? What about your brother? Did you share it with a few of your close friends, another guy in the past, your mom, your aunt?"

I contemplate his question, but it's hard to concentrate with his fingers gathering the tears from my eyes and stroking my skin.

"Bryanna, I won't ask you again—tell me."

I shake my head, because his question brings a whole other level of questions to the forefront. "He was the only one I ever told I was a virgin, but he cared about me, Damian. It crushed Chad when I told him I just wanted to be friends."

"I'm sure it did, Doll. Now I want to know the friends you both had in common. Who did you hang out with together, who did you hang out with separately, but that knew the other?"

I sniff, and he stands, walks over to the counter to grab a tissue, and brings it to me and places it up to my nose. I pull away slightly, embarrassed, but he grasps me firmly, pulling me closer. "Let me take care of you, Bryanna," Damian says, wiping the errant tears and my nose with a swipe of the tissue.

The tears fall harder, and all the emotions of the last few weeks seem to gather and cascade down my face at once. He's patient and continuously wipes my tears while running his finger along the seam of my lip, causing another sensation to slowly gather in my center.

Chapter 21

Damian

I'm wiping Bryanna's tears and consoling her, but my mind is already compiling what we know against unanswered questions. Someone who knows Bryanna is a virgin told someone who then had her taken, or worse yet, the person who knew set her up to be taken themselves. If that's the case, that person better go into hiding for the rest of their life because when I find him, if I let him live, he'll regret what he did for the rest of his miserable life.

It's clear she's overcome with emotion, and although I need this information, I know when and when not to push. "You didn't get a very good night's sleep last night, and you're emotionally drained. Let's settle in so you can rest. We can talk later," I say, sliding my hands underneath her thighs. "Arms around my neck, Doll. Hang on to me."

Bryanna does as I ask immediately. I lift her into my arms, the gesture causing my dick to grow and shift in my pants. She is so fucking perfect, utterly responsive to my every request. I glance down at her as I carry her to my bedroom. Her eyes have become heavy with emotion and weariness. She has gone through so much in the last few weeks, things that I have yet to learn. Her emotional dams have opened, she is in need of aftercare, and I won't let her be alone. I lay her on the bed, toe off my shoes, and slide in beside her before pulling the extra coverlet over top of us.

She nuzzles into my chest, and I cradle her hair, stroking down the back of her locks, and holding her close as her breathing begins to normalize, and her tears finally begin to stem. After awhile, she glances up at me and a barely discernible, "I'm sorry," comes out.

"Sleep, Bryanna. You have nothing to be sorry for. Rest, and we'll talk later," I say, stroking her back until she relaxes, and her breathing becomes

even and deep. I hold her for close to twenty minutes, my mind knowing she is sound asleep and that I could leave her, and she would be fine, but my body refuses to allow it. Instead, I gather her closer, kiss the top of her forehead, cradle her in my arms, and after a sleepless night and busy morning, fall into a deep sleep right along beside her.

* * *

It is much later, and I stretch to check my phone and have to look twice at the time. It's almost 5 p.m. Clearly the events of the past couple days and our sleepless night meant a need for catch-up. Bryanna is still asleep in my arms, and while I hate to leave the warmth of her body, I have multiple messages from the team that need to be reviewed before she wakes. I get out of bed, careful not to disturb her, and after a stop in the bathroom, head to the kitchen. I hit Matt's phone number as I pour a cup of coffee from the carafe on the counter.

"Hey, I was beginning to worry about you. It's not like you not to respond to messages."

"Sorry, we were asleep. Up most of the night."

"I didn't know it was like that." Matt chuckles on the other end of the phone.

I could give him a smart-ass response, but I decide against it because I haven't quite sorted out what it is and what it's not myself. "What did you learn? Were you able to get any more info on Bryanna's brother or the others?" I ask instead and take a long chug of coffee.

"As a matter of fact, we've been following him the whole time you've been, um, sleeping. He's getting close to his mom's house. When he gets there, he'll find out his mom and kids are gone. We're assuming he'll hole-up there for awhile. We have it wired for sound, and cameras are placed in every room. You know Marenah; she wants to make sure we don't miss a thing. If he's guilty of anything, or knows anything that will help get a lock on this trafficking racket, she'll beat it out of him herself."

I chuckle, not because anything about this situation is remotely funny, but the thought of Matt's girlfriend chasing Bryanna's brother down and pounding him is not out of the realm of possibility. She is a formidable opponent, trained in special ops, and her life's passion is taking down

traffickers. I'm only appreciative that she's on our side and not theirs. "You thank her for me, and keep me posted. I'll be with Bryanna tonight and hopefully have a little more info to provide to the group later in the evening," I say before disconnecting.

I feel Bryanna's presence and glance up. "The information that you need from me?"

I won't lie and don't. "Yep, I was talking to Matt, one of our security team. His wife is head of the trafficking division for our team. She'll help us sort it if we can get her enough information."

"I see. So whatever you're told goes to her," Bryanna asks, searching my eyes. She's not disagreeable, just seemingly curious.

"Depends. I'll listen, and if it's pertinent in helping us find out who's behind this operation, then I'll share it with her. If it's personal and doesn't shed light on the case, then it stays between me and you. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"Hmm, for what I need to share with you, perhaps a glass of wine, maybe two."

I'm not usually a fan of drinking while we're exploring emotions, but she's been through hell, and I won't deny her as long as I'm close enough to keep her safe. "You like a sweet red," I say, and she glances up quickly, clearly surprised that I know her preference, but then nods.

"Brian hired our team to find you and bring you home. That meant researching your habits and such. That's how I know," I explain, pouring her a glass of wine before replenishing my mug with a flavored decaf.

She contemplates and then nods. "I thought as much. Are you hungry?" she asks.

"I am, and will make us something while we talk."

Bryanna smiles, one that lights up her entire face and enhances the green of her eyes, before shaking her head. "You took care of me last night, made me breakfast, took care of me when I was an emotional mess. It's my turn. I love to cook. Can I make us something for dinner?"

"I'd be honored. Let's see what we have in the kitchen for something to tide us over. We'll have a nice dinner later on and can talk while we're cooking."

"While I'm cooking!" she sasses.

"Careful, young lady, or I might have to spank your ass to make my point."

Her cheeks color beautifully, and her eyes smoke over with desire. She starts to say something, thinks better of it; instead, gives me a playful pout. “Okay, you win. You can help, but what if I truly wanted to do it by myself? To do something to say thank you for all you’ve done?”

It’s my turn to contemplate now. This woman seems to throw me off balance and keep me enthralled at every turn. “As long as you were feeling well, I would allow it.”

She rubs her hands together. “Excellent. Then how about you sit here and ask me all of your security questions while I cook?”

My eyes narrow, and I try my hardest to keep from smiling at her tactic. “I think that can be accommodated. You’ll find everything you need in the refrigerator,” I say, knowing that it’s been stocked for days.

Bryanna moves to the fridge and searches its contents while I admire the heart-shaped ass that fills out her jeans beautifully and which is positioned at just the right height for my inspection.

“It’s still early, but we didn’t have lunch. What about a Mediterranean omelet?”

“Anything you like, Doll. That should hold us over nicely.”

She begins unloading eggs, fresh peppers, onions, and feta cheese onto the counter before diving back to her search. “Found them! Pepperoncini! These are the best. They’ll hold the melted feta, and every bite will be amazing!” she proclaims.

“Sounds great, so you cook, and I ask questions. You still okay with that?” I don’t want to push her any further than she can emotionally go, but time is passing fast, and we need more information.

“I don’t like talking about it, but as long as you’re good with me drinking a bit of wine and cooking, I can probably get through it,” Bryanna says.

There are more pleasurable ways that I could drag it out of her, but she’s not ready for that yet. Tonight, we’ll settle for wine and cooking. “Sounds like a plan.”

She nods, fumbling under the cabinets for a pan.

“Far one on the left. There’s a little sauté pan that’s perfect for omelets.”

She smiles when she finds it and brings it up. “You cook?”

“Here and there. Gaby usually has our food all prepared and delivered to the places we stay, but every once in a while a man just feels like an omelet or Italian food, and I saw it when I was checking the place out. Okay, no more stalling, Doll. First question? Ready?”

“Bring it,” Bryanna says, but her eyes lower, and while she pretends to be paying attention to the oil she has swirling in the pan, I can see her apprehension from here.

“Let’s start with the same question I asked you earlier.”

Bryanna nods and continues to whisk the eggs and milk she’s combined in the glass bowl while her eyes intermittently catch mine, but she doesn’t say a word.

It’s clear after a couple moments she’s not going to tell me without prompting. “I need to know the friends you and your boyfriend had in common. Who did you hang out with together, or perhaps separately who may have known each other?”

She nods and then shrugs. “I’ve been thinking about it since you asked the first time. Chad was seriously the only one that knew, Damian. I’ve been ashamed of the fact that I’m a twenty-two-year-old virgin for a long time. It’s not exactly something I told my friends or family. He had a special night planned for us and, well, I already told you the rest. I had to be honest with him, and he seemed to take it as well as can be expected. He wouldn’t have told his friends. He’s not like that, and it wasn’t his fault; it was mine. It’s me. I’m not like other women.”

My jaw tightens at her response. “Not like other women how?”

She swirls the pan and places a perfectly set omelet onto the plate before she looks up at me, capturing me with that vivid gaze of hers. “I’ve always been searching for something I’ve never found, but always read about. A man who, well, takes charge, you know, in every way,” Bryanna says softly, almost a whisper, and my cock turns hard as stone.

I watch as she finishes cooking and then plates the second omelet and brings my plate and a glass of orange juice with it to the table. I’ve known she was submissive since the first time she looked up at me with those large, green, hazy bedroom eyes, but hearing her tell me herself does something to me like nothing ever has before.

Chapter 22

Bryanna

I set his plate down in front of him and glance at his face. I've always been embarrassed about my sexual fantasies, but he asked—no, he demanded that I answer all his questions. I can't change the way I am, and that's that.

I turn, intending to head from the dining room into the kitchen to bring my plate and drink to the table and finish the interrogation, but his hands snake around my waist, and he pulls me right onto his lap.

“You don't get to walk away from me like you think I'll not accept what you've said. I like a woman who knows what she wants and doesn't want, Bryanna. We're actually very similar creatures, and just desire different roles in the power exchange. You see, I very much like being in control, being the one in charge, and taking care of my submissive. Do you know what a perfect submissive you are, Doll?” Damian asks, stroking my cheek.

My mouth opens in surprise, but absolutely nothing comes out. I'm very aware of the hardness beneath me, and I couldn't say a word even if I knew what to say.

“Bryanna, when I ask you a question, I expect an answer,” Damian says, gently pushing a lock of hair from my face.

I take a deep breath as the words that have been rattling around in my mind finally form. “You think I'm a submissive? A real submissive?”

“Bryanna, you are the most perfect of submissives. That's what drew me to you, that's what caused the magnetic pull that we've felt between us, and that's why I'm going to give you a safe word and then kiss you again, unless you use it. Your safe word is 'red,’” Damian says, before he grasps my neck and pulls me so close that I can smell the masculine scent that sends desire straight to my center.

He runs his tongue along my seam, teasing and tormenting until my lips part, and he delves inside, exploring with his own. I have no words, need no words. His kisses are the best I've ever had, but deep inside I know it's because he sees me for who I am. He understands my desires, and my center clenches with a need so great I might explode before he's finished kissing me.

"Tell me you like this, Bryanna," Damian says, running his tongue along the seam of my lip and stroking my cheek with his finger.

"I love it," I say on a breath as his fingers crawl along the sensitive flesh of my collarbone, making their way to my erect nipples as he caresses and suckles on the underside of my earlobe.

He teases the delicate flesh, alternating little kisses with his warm breath. I hear the little pants and they're coming from me. I've never felt anything so incredibly good. "Please, please, don't stop," I whisper so softly that I'm not even sure I've said it aloud until he responds.

"You beg so sweetly, Doll. I'm going to make you come all over my fingers," Damian says, turning me on his lap as his hand makes its way along my waist, undoing the button on the skintight jeans he's purchased for me.

His fingers slide beneath the waistband, leaving a tingling sensation where he touches my skin, and a hot streak of desire as he slowly caresses and finds his way underneath the lace of the panties and in between my folds.

The minute he touches my clit, I hear myself moan softly. He adjusts me on his lap. "Spread your legs for me, Bryanna."

I do exactly as he's asked, and his fingers slip through my folds, lingering in my center while he kisses my neck.

"So deliciously wet for me, Doll," Damian says, painting the moisture upward as his fingers caress and explore, focusing on the bundle of nerves practically thrumming with pent-up need for this man. His lips devour the sensitive skin of my neck while his strong arms hold me against him, not allowing me to squirm as he strokes the tender flesh, pressing me against him as he plays, and wave after delicious wave overtakes me. He holds me trembling against him as he continues caressing me until the very last little waves have dissipated, and I'm muscle weary and completely sated.

Damian situates me so he can cradle me in his arms as his tongue caresses the seam of my mouth and then trails down the length of my neck to my collarbone. "So very beautiful and so very responsive. I think you have something that belongs to me, though," Damian says, letting his finger trail

through my folds to my center. “You’re so creamy, Doll, and that’s all mine, isn’t it?” he asks, holding my gaze intently as his fingers collect what he’s sought. He brings it to his mouth, licking very slowly while I watch, causing my center to clench with renewed desire.

“Absolutely delicious. Have you ever tasted yourself, Bryanna?” Damian asks, and I’m sure my cheeks turn three different shades of red.

I shake my head, and his lips turn up in a seductive smile. “You’ll have to learn to use your words, Doll. Say ‘I’ve never tasted myself before,’” Damian instructs, causing me to blush so hard my cheeks turn hot, and my pussy clenches.

“I’ve never tasted myself, ever.” I force myself not to hide but to keep looking into those eyes that are watching me intently and expecting a reply.

“So responsive, so delightfully responsive,” Damian says before kissing me again, parting my lips, finding my tongue and dancing with it so that I can taste myself for the very first time.

When he finishes our kiss, I let my head lean against his chest and close my eyes. This is extreme romance, the level of intimacy that I’ve always dreamed about but have never experienced until now. Damian sees me, understands me, and makes me desire more, far more than any of the websites or books have ever done.

He pushes the hair that has fallen over my cheeks back from my face, and my eyes open wide with realization that I haven’t done anything for him. Is he waiting for me to do something? Perhaps stroke him, or something else? I’m not a person who initiates things like this well; it just never works out. Instead, it’s usually a source of embarrassment, not only to me, but my partner. I want to please Damian in return, but I simply don’t know what he would like.

His eyes squint slightly as he watches me ponder. “What are you thinking about?”

I swallow back the fear and the confusion. If I tell him, he’ll know I’m not wired right.

His deep, throaty voice pulls me from my reverie, and his finger tilts my chin upward, so I have no choice but to look at him. “I’d like an answer,” Damian says gently.

I nod, and his eyes come together in a squint. I raise my hand and laugh. “I know, words. I’ll try, but, once I do...” I shrug.

His eyebrows knit together, and he traces a finger over my lips. “Tell me,

Bryanna. Tell me what's worrying you."

"I don't know how to do this, to reciprocate, to ... to please you." I close my eyes because I don't want to see the look of disappointment on his face. I can't keep doing this, relationship after relationship.

"Open your eyes and look at me, Bryanna."

I do as he's asked, and his eyes are smoldering with something unrecognizable. "Do you think I want you to get me off? Is that what you're afraid of?"

I shake my head, but the look of concern on his face stops me cold. "No, it's not that, Damian. I would do that and love it. I don't know how to say this without getting it all messed up, but I ... I don't know how to slip from you being in charge and telling me what to do, to me doing that and pleasing you."

His face widens into a large smile, and he strokes my neck, pushing against the pulse that has finally begun to beat normally under his touch. "That's good Doll, because that's not how this dynamic works. It's not up to you to determine how to please me. Doing what I ask pleases me. It's my role to tell you what I'd like you to do. If I wanted you to touch me, I would have told you to get on your knees and unzip me. I would have told you to take my cock out and then to lick the tip with your tongue so you could taste the precum there from touching you. You don't need to initiate anything, Doll. Let me take care of your desires, and by doing so, you will take care of mine. Is that something you can do?"

The pulse his finger circles has begun to speed up with excitement. I close my eyes just long enough to center myself. I'm fully awake and cradled in his arms, but I feel like I'm experiencing one of the best dreams of my life. My voice catches in my throat as I answer. "It's exactly what I want, Damian," I say, watching as his eyes turn to molten lava.

Chapter 23

Damian

I wait silently for her response, my finger still playing light circles on the pulse of her creamy white neck, delighting in the fact it speeds under my touch. I give her more time than I would normally allow, but she's been through so much and this is a big decision. She's just looking at me with those deep green eyes, and it takes every bit of willpower that I have not to prompt her response. While I've had multiple submissives, this intense desire to care for Bryanna's every need is something special, and it feels like a bond between two people made for each other.

Her eyes have clouded over, and I wait as she processes her thoughts. "It's exactly what I want, Damian," she says.

I exhale the breath I've been holding, waiting her response. I'm twenty-eight-years-old, she's six years my junior, and I've been hired as her protector. I shouldn't be thinking of her like this, shouldn't have taken liberties or offered this experience. Never once have I mixed business with pleasure, but there is not a chance in hell I'm allowing Bryanna to learn the ways of the world she's craving with anyone but me.

I'd like nothing better than to have her completely undress, lift her into my arms, lay her over the bar, and show her the pleasure my tongue can bring her as she writhes on the end of it, but the ding of my cell reminds me that my desires for Bryanna need to take a back seat at least for a little while.

"While I'd love nothing better than to see you spread out across this bar, open for me, to do what I wish with you, we need to talk first so I can keep your family safe," I say, keeping her warm body close and caressing her cheek.

Her hazy eyes clear and become more pointed, focusing on me.

“Let’s eat a little something. You’ll answer all my questions, and then I’ll reward you,” I say, sliding the zipper up her jeans.

Her dreamy eyes go wide, and she nods, and my cock throbs hard against the seam of my jeans. I slide my arms beneath her knees, and before I’ve even asked her to hang onto my neck, she’s grasping it, secure in the knowledge that I will keep her safe and protected, and my chest tightens with an unfamiliar emotion.

When we reach the kitchen, I place her on a barstool and grimace at the beautiful omelet she made that’s now probably cold and rubbery. “Sorry about the omelets. I’ll get us both a glass of wine and cut up a little cheese before dinner. Most nights, if we play we won’t drink, but tonight, a glass of wine or two is in perfect order. I need to know everything you can tell me about your ex-boyfriend. So, he’s the only one who knew you were a virgin, no girlfriends, family?”

Bryanna shrugs. “Nope, just him. It’s not something I’m exactly proud of, and the places my friends like to go, well, let’s just say the guys who hang out there aren’t exactly my cup of tea,” she says.

I make a mental note to have a discussion with her about that, but I need answers, and quickly, if the last message from the security team is any indication. “Did you hear from him after he left? Any threatening exchanges, phone calls, texts, emails, anything I need to know, Bryanna? You need to think hard about this, because whoever set you up to be taken knew you were a virgin.”

Her eyes widen and cloud with emotion. “Damian, if you think Chad was behind it, you’re wrong. He cared about me and me him, just not like that. What you’re suggesting, it’s just, well, it’s impossible.”

“It’s my job to find out and explore everything possible, so humor me, okay?”

“Sure, I can do that. Ask me anything! I’m an open book,” Bryanna says, her hands outstretched widely.

I smirk and try not to let my mind wander to the questions I’d really like to ask her. “I need a list of his friends, who he hung out with, because while you may not have told anyone but him, he may have told others.”

Her brows wrinkle, and her lips tighten. “No, see, that’s what I’m saying. Chad wasn’t like all those guys out there, just trying to score. He wouldn’t be talking about me like that. He really cared about me, Damian, and I hate that I hurt him so badly. I cared for him, just not as a lover.”

“You did both of you a favor by understanding your needs and realizing that you weren’t compatible. Trust me, he wouldn’t have been happy in the long run. I’m still going to need a list of his friends and his family.” I slide a pen and pad of paper to her. “Write as many down as you can remember while I refresh our wine,” I say, taking the glass in front of her that has little more than a drizzle left at the bottom.

I give her time to write, and only allow her another glass of wine because I know without a doubt the drugs have cleared her system, and pour myself one too, this time before checking my phone in between glances of watching her while she crinkles her brows and writes name after name. She has no idea how beautiful she is, and the fact that she’s ashamed of her virginity is incomprehensible to me.

The text I’m waiting for comes in just as I’m placing her glass of wine in front of her. She glances up at me, pen mid-stroke, and there’s something about that look that keeps my focus on her and not the message. “What’s the matter?” she asks.

“Nothing to worry about. Keep going, Bryanna.”

“There was one time we were out with another couple. One of my girlfriends brought a new date along. They went to dance, and we were talking, you know, about that ... you know ... the fact that I hadn’t done anything before, and my friend and the guy she was with came back unexpectedly. He might have heard the last part of our conversation about it. I recall the look he gave me. I sort of forgot about it when you asked, but I couldn’t shake it for a couple days. It was just super creepy.”

The hair on the back of my neck prickles. “I need the name of your friend and the creep.”

She nods. “Yep, her name is Meghan Richards, and his was something like Romeo, but it wasn’t that exactly. Wait, let me think,” she says, scrunching her brows for a few seconds. “It was Ramiro! Yep, it was Ramiro!”

“Remember his last name?” I ask, because this fucker is going into our database as soon as I get a lock on him. Instincts! Always trust your instincts. Bryanna knew, she just didn’t know to trust them or what to do, and damn it if she’ll ever be in that position again.

“No, just his first.”

“Go to your school?”

“No, just someone Megs met at another club.”

“Do you know your friend’s phone number, Bryanna?”

She shakes her head as she contemplates this. “Damn cell phone technology. I just used to hit her pic on my contacts. I don’t have a clue what her phone number is, and I haven’t seen my cell since the night they picked me up—

“Oh, wait, my mom has it! It’s in the address and phone number book I gave her. Mom is not into technology, but she wanted her number one other time when we went away together for the weekend. If you and your security team didn’t take it away from her, she should still have it. It’s small, and she always kept it in her purse.”

“Excellent, let’s get your mom on the phone, but I want to hear the conversation.”

“Are you serious, right now?” she asks, almost bouncing out of the barstool I’ve placed her on, and the fact I’ve asked to listen to the conversation doesn’t seem to faze her in the slightest.

I hand a burner cell to Bryanna, listening to the happy and tearful reunion while I rummage through the refrigerator to get a few things out for a late dinner, but the hairs on the back of my neck stand at edge when her mom tells her she just spoke with her brother and she told him where they are staying, and he’s on his way to see her and the kids.

Chapter 24

Bryanna

Just the sound of my mom's voice is enough to make me swallow back the emotions of the last few weeks. "Baby, the security team told me everything. I'm so very sorry. I can't wait to hold you in my arms, sweetheart," she says and the sadness in my mom's voice causes my tears to spill over. I turn from the counter, away from the eyes that are heating my skin as they penetrate me.

"It's okay, Mom. It could have been so much worse. We'll be together as soon as we can, okay, and we'll talk more then? Right now I'm staying with Damian, and he's taking care of me. I don't have my cell phone, and I need Meghan's phone number."

"Hang on a minute. Let me grab my purse, okay?" I hear the clink of a phone being laid on a hard surface and then the squeal of children's laughter as my niece and nephew banter in the background. My chest tightens with the knowledge that everyone I love is safe, and it's all thanks to Damian.

I gaze at him over the wine glass and find his dark penetrating eyes taking me in. I glance down so he doesn't see my attraction to him. The last thing he needs to deal with is a woman with no relationship experience to speak of, who can't tell the difference between an offer to have a good time versus the overpowering feeling that I'm starting to have for him. This is why men don't want inexperienced women like me. I swallow hard and will the ache in my center to calm, taking another sip of wine before my mother returns to the line.

"Do you have a pen or pencil?" she asks. I smile, watching Damian, who is on the ready to plug the number she provides into his cell. Techy, my mom is not.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I tell her, rolling my eyes upward.

I can’t help but watch as the curves of Damian’s lips turn upward momentarily. His eyes seem to dance with amusement.

She provides me with the number, he captures it electronically, and then Mom catches me up on the kids’ drama, and then tells me that my brother just called and wants to come and see them. I hate the fact he picks and chooses when to make an appearance in their life, but I know the kids love him dearly and are always thrilled to see their daddy when he makes time to visit. We talk for a few more moments before disconnecting, and I promise her that I’ll connect with her tomorrow.

When I glance up and go to hand the cell back to Damian, his eyes are heated and intense, and he’s pounding out message after message on his cell.

“Damian, what’s wrong?” I ask, but he only glances up at me briefly before resuming his messaging. I give it a minute, and his fingers finally come to a stop before the full weight of his stare is upon me. The intensity I see is enough to tell me something’s wrong, but there’s more swirling in those deep, penetrating eyes of his.

“Tell me, Damian. If it’s about me, I have a right to know.”

His eyes hold mine for a moment as he contemplates this, but then he nods his agreement. “You’ve more than earned the right to know everything about this fucked-up situation, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t want to protect you from it, Bryanna.”

There it is. That word again, protect. I love that he wants to keep us protected, but it also reminds me that while he may be interested in a little sex, I’m just a job. Brian Carrington, one of the wealthiest billionaires in the world, is paying him to protect me because of his relationship with my aunt. I need to keep that in mind. He is older, he is probably completely experienced in the ways of the world and would probably die of mortification if he knew what was running through my silly romantic little mind right now. I need to stop thinking about him in this way. He may want to have sex with me and teach me a few things, but that doesn’t mean he feels the same way that I do. Just because we’re attracted to each other physically doesn’t mean that a relationship will develop. I seriously need to keep things in perspective, or I fear my runaway heart will end up being totally destroyed.

Damian’s deep, authoritative voice penetrates my reverie. “Bryanna, I’ll tell you what you want to know, and when the time is right, we’re going to have a discussion about what’s bothering you. Okay, Doll?” he says, lifting

my chin with his finger so my eyes have no choice but to settle on his own.

I nod, mesmerized by his eyes, the way they're looking at me, the way their causing my nipples to harden, my center to moisten, and my blood to pound.

"Your mother gave your brother the address where she's staying, against our specific requests. We understand that she's just focused on the children being able to see their father, but we were having your brother checked out, and in the process our intel team identified a tail."

"A tail?"

"Someone who is following your brother. We don't know who it is yet, but we're fairly certain the connections lead back to the people who took you. We have the best trafficking division there is. Marenah is in charge of it, and she's not going to stop until we find what we need, but until that happens, we need to be extra careful, and this just throws complications into the entire situation," Damian says.

"I don't know a lot about my brother's life. I wish it were different, but he's been really distant the last few years. The only time I've spoken to him is when he's come to see the kids, and I've been there."

"We'll get it figured out and make sure your family is secure in the process."

"I really appreciate everything that you're doing, you know, taking such good care of us for Brian and Aunt Jenny."

Damian's eyes darken, and he walks around the counter to stand next to me. He doesn't touch me, just penetrates me with those deep blue eyes of his. "You think that's all there is to this?"

I don't answer because my response is caught in my throat.

He lifts my chin with his forefinger, causing me to gaze into those emotion-filled eyes gazing down at me. "Bryanna, one thing you should remember, as I've stated this multiple times this afternoon, but when I ask you a question, I require a verbal response. When I ask you to do something, it will be to ensure your safety, your health, or your pleasure, and I will expect you to comply. Can you agree to submit to me, Bryanna?"

My center clenches with need as his voice washes over me, and my mind swirls trying to digest the meaning, but he's been clear. He's laid it out there, and the words *your pleasure* resound in my mind.

Chapter 25

Damian

Her gaze falls to the ground, but her heart is still racing, almost in time to my own. I watch it beat through the thin material of her sweater for a few seconds, taking in the myriad of emotions that play across her gentle features as she absorbs what I've said.

As soon as I mentioned protecting her, the light in Bryanna's eyes diminished, and damn if everything we've been skirting around doesn't become overtly clear. She can't hide her desire from me, because I see it in her eyes, in her breathing, and the very way she looks at me when I give her direction and ask her to submit.

Bryanna is still watching me, and her breathing shallows, her eyes dilate, and her pulse beats rapidly on the side of her neck. She agrees to my question, and my dick hardens with the thought of her doing exactly that. I grasp under her thighs, lifting her, and pulling her center to my waist as her arms encircle my neck.

I place Bryanna on the counter so that we're at eye level. "You were quick to agree, Doll, but I need to make sure you fully understand what you're agreeing to."

Her eyes are still glazed over, and my cock strains against the confines of my pants as I watch her settle into her submission and need. "Bryanna, tell me what you want, Doll, tell me what you desire," I say and watch as she processes my request.

It takes her a moment, and I would be disappointed if it didn't. "I want you to teach me everything," Bryanna says, her eyes capturing mine, but then glancing at the floor.

I lift her chin with my finger and stroke the moistness of her lips. "I won't

allow you to be embarrassed by your innocence, understand? The fact that you haven't given yourself to anyone else before now is a gift; it's a treasure, not something to be embarrassed about."

Bryanna looks back up at me, and her pupils have dilated. She nods as that little pink tongue of hers comes out to stroke over her lips. Fuck, she's hot and doesn't even have a clue.

She watches me for a second. "You don't want me to look down?" Bryanna asks, and damn if my cock doesn't double in size at her question.

I try to control my smirk, because I know exactly what she's been up to. "Why do you ask that, Bryanna? Have you been reading about submission on websites, books, somewhere else?" I ask gently.

The pink tinge to her cheeks and the light in her eyes tell me I've hit upon at least one truth, and the visual of her studying submission is not going to get out of my head for a very long time. I contemplate how to answer her question. "Every couple's dynamic is different, but when you're with me, I don't want to see your eyes lowered to the floor. I want to see those beautiful eyes at all times. I want to see your feelings and not have you hide them from me."

She nods, granting me access to the myriad of emotions playing through her eyes, before I slide my hand beneath her hair and grasp the smooth skin of her neck, pulling her toward me and capturing her velvety lips with my own. I stroke the seam, teasing and caressing until Bryanna parts for me, allowing me to explore the sweetness within.

I swallow her soft little moans and try to ignore the pulsing of my cock as it strains against the seam of my trousers. I kiss her deeply, hungry for a profound connection, a primal desire to consume every inch of her with my need. "You have no idea how precious of a gift you hold," I say, stroking the creaminess of her neck, following the pulsing of her heartbeat.

"I don't want to be a virgin anymore, and I want you to be my first," Bryanna says, looking at me with those deep wide eyes a man could absolutely drown in.

I shouldn't have started this, or be this damn attracted to every single thing about this woman, but I push those thoughts away as I slide my hands under her shapely thighs, lifting her to me. Her legs wrap around my back, and her hands snake around my neck like she belongs exactly there. I kiss her silky lips, walk us to my bedroom, and then stand her in front of my bed.

Bryanna's eyes glaze over with desire, and her cheeks begin shading with

pink before she speaks. “I don’t know exactly how to do this, but I trust you to know and to teach me,” she says, and with that my chest constricts with the desire to do exactly that.

I kiss her lips once more, and then let my lips taste and explore the sweetness of her creamy neck until I settle at its base. She leans into me and moans softly as I continue to suckle her, raising the thin material of her sweater from her body and exposing the delicate beauty of her curves. “Let me undress you, Doll, I want to see you bare,” I say, reaching around to unhook her white lacy bra, slipping it slowly from her shoulders, and letting it slink to the floor as my eyes feast on her beauty.

My breath catches and chest tightens at the sight of her creamy white breasts and rose-colored nipples bared only for me. My dick hardens with need for this woman and the desire to make her first experience everything she ever dreamed of.

I stroke her nipples, a soft caress, and they harden under my forefinger as I watch her eyes go glazy with need. Bryanna begins to close them, but then opens them wide, recalling my earlier request.

“You remembered, Doll. I like that very much.”

Her eyes widen even further, and the pulse in the center of her neck beats a little faster under my praise, while my dick throbs with approval at her wish to please.

I take my time, letting her see my desire as I stroke her pert breasts and then apply pressure to one nipple. Her pulse increases and eyes grow hazy as I continue my exploration to see just how much firmness she enjoys. Her mouth opens in a satisfied O as I let one of my fingers trail down the silkiness of her skin, across her taut belly, circling where she’s bared her center.

“When I stroke your pussy, will it already be wet for me, Bryanna?”

She inhales deeply, and her flushed cheeks tell me everything she hasn’t said yet.

“Doll, I asked you a question,” I say, stroking a little lower, enthralled by the pulsing of her body and its magnetic exchange with my own.

“Yes,” Bryanna manages, although it’s barely audible.

I don’t take my eyes off of hers as I stroke lower, gliding over her clit and through her slippery folds, wetting my fingers with her desire as I increase the pressure on her nipple. Her head rolls back slightly, and she purrs so sweetly under my touch that my cock hardens to steel.

I gather her arousal on my finger before drawing it from her center. The

slight sulk of her mouth is adorable, but she won't be sad for long. I paint the moisture against the smoothness of her lips before kissing her, tasting the sweetness of her desire and coaxing her open until she parts for me, allowing me to devour her with the heat and passion of my need.

I swallow her moans, continuing to lightly stroke her pussy, aroused more than I've ever been by this chemistry between us and how responsive she is to my touch. I lift her slight frame and place her gently on my bed, dragging my mouth away from hers to suckle down the creaminess of her neck. Bryanna shivers with desire as I reach the sensitive spot between her neck and shoulder. I linger for awhile, stoking her heat before leisurely making my way down her belly, kissing and licking her skin as I trail my way to her center. Bryanna's eyes are intently focused on mine, and her belly rises and falls with the rhythm of her breath. The way she responds to my touch, and the scent of her arousal, are aphrodisiacs, causing my balls to tighten with need for the beauty completely nude and spread before me.

I take my time, letting her anticipation grow, circling her mound with slight licks of my tongue. Her head rolls to one side, but she hasn't lost focus of my eyes. I make a mental note to reward her later, but the need to taste her obliterates all else. I stroke her with my tongue, slowly at first, and my name escapes her lips in a soft cry as her entire body tenses with the sensation. I wrap my hands around her hips, holding her close and still, inhaling deeply as I stroke across her entire center, caressing, teasing, and watching with delight as her eyes turn dark and smoldering with unleashed need.

I tease her clit with light strokes, determining what she likes, and am rewarded with soft little purrs that cause precum to leak from the head of my cock. She raises her hips as I stroke, and her need grows. In time, she'll learn to hold still for me as I pleasure her, but for now I grasp her hips as I part her folds with my tongue, watching her eyes go wide as I dip into the very center of her need. She moans softly and grips the bedsheets as I let my tongue caress her deeper, then trail over her clit, before sliding a finger deep inside of her.

She tries to raise her hips, but I hold them still.

"Damian."

Just the sound of my name on her lips causes my chest to pound with desire for this woman. "You'll take more before you're ready for me," I say, following with another finger. I give her a moment to acclimate, feeling just how exquisitely tight my little virgin is and knowing the stretch is new. Her

mouth forms that same little O, and then in the next breath my name falls from her gorgeous lips. “Damian...”

I could listen to her whisper my name in arousal all fucking night. I slide my fingers in deep, stroking against the sensitive walls of her core, feeling her desire wet my fingers as I scissor them to help her accommodate my width. Her greedy little pussy squeezes my fingers tight. I can tell she’s getting close, so I stroke her clit lighter and just slightly off the mark, watching with aroused amusement as her displeasure shows in the turn of her lip.

“Patience, Doll, one more finger before you’re ready.”

“Damian,” she exhales as I insert the last digit into her tight little core. I lick her clit, tasting her sweetness, keeping her on edge for just a moment, enough to allow her to acclimate to the fullness. When her wetness washes my fingers, I drive into her, spreading her velvety channel, all the while sucking the bundle of nerves that makes her scream out my name, over and over again, until the final wave dissipates, and my hand is soaked in her desire.

I allow her to come down while I undress for her, enjoying the glazed appreciation in her heated stare as I wrap myself. I settle myself on the mattress to lean down and kiss her, resting on my elbows to keep the weight of my body from crushing her slight frame.

Her breathing is still racing from her orgasm, and her eyes are still hazy with desire. I stroke the side of her cheek and trail down to her mouth. “You can still change your mind, Bryanna.”

She grasps my face with both of her hands and shakes her head. “No, I want this, Damian—I want you to be my first,” Bryanna says. I rub my cock against the entrance of her heat, inching in slowly, using her arousal to lubricate myself.

“Breathe, Bryanna,” I say, and she exhales her held breath at my command as I plunge deep inside of her, removing the very last physical barrier that we have between us.

She cries out and grasps my arms, squeezing tightly, mirroring her eyes that have shut tight with the intrusion.

“Look at me, Bryanna,” I say gently, bringing her gorgeous eyes back to me and soaking up her velvety warmth while letting her accommodate, knowing the sting has already started to subside when her walls begin to soften around me.

I take her mouth in a heated kiss, expending my need as I force myself to wait a few moments before pulling back, slowly gliding through her arousal to ensure she's well lubricated and doesn't tear from the width. I stroke into her, a half inch at a time, until I'm fully seated, and the base of my cock is firmly planted. I take turns licking and sucking her nipples, pulling them with my mouth, and her body shifts with desire below me.

"Patience, Bryanna," I demand, sliding out and then thrusting deep, gliding right to the very end of her. I do it again, and when she cries out and begins to pant, I know I've found the exact spot I'm looking for.

"Damian, oh my god," she half whispers, and with that, I know she is ready, and already so close again. I raise her thighs, pushing them toward her chest, thrusting deeply inside her, focused on that special little spot that's making her whisper my name over and over, and then drive even harder, causing her to spiral out of control before I release deep inside of her.

I ride us through the waves, swallowing her cries and pants until we're both completely finished and utterly sated. I roll to my side, bringing her with me, still joined as one.

"That was more than I ever expected, and I'm so glad it was with you," Bryanna says, causing my chest to tighten with the gift she has given me and an intense and unfamiliar need to keep her wrapped in my arms and never let her go.

Chapter 26

Bryanna

Damian steps out of the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around his waist, and I watch as a couple drops he's missed when drying off glide down the expanse of his chest.

He catches me gawking and smirks at me as he dresses while I continue to enjoy the show. The cell phone on the dresser begins to vibrate. He picks it up and frowns at it before stepping out of the bedroom and closing the door behind him. I use the time alone to curl myself into his pillow, still relishing in the aftermath of our lovemaking while inhaling his scent.

"Her fucking brother!" I hear, and then his voice lowers, but by this time I've already jumped out of bed and made my naked ass to the door. I crack it open and am crouched, listening through the opening. His voice is fading, most likely moving toward the kitchen, but I can still make out bits and pieces of the conversation. My blood runs cold when I hear him mention another auction. I hear him say that my brother will be in attendance, and in the same sentence I hear him call him a bastard trafficker.

I shouldn't be eavesdropping, but I can't help myself from straining to hear every single word.

"Masquerade ball, same club as before. Tomorrow night, 10 p.m., I'll be there. Pull the team together for a conference call tomorrow. This fucker doesn't get anywhere near any of those girls! In the meantime, make sure the audio at the safe house is set to go before he gets there, and get a couple men inside the home. If he's planning to be in New Orleans tomorrow night, he won't be there long. Keep your eyes and ears open. I don't trust that fucker, but we can't legally keep him from his kids," Damian says.

As soon as he's done talking, I hightail it into the bathroom and close the

door behind me, my breath ragged and heavy, trying to figure out exactly what I've just heard.

I jump in the shower and turn on the water, letting the spray rain over me and the information I've heard soak in. Damian thinks my brother is involved in trafficking, and he's headed straight to wherever they're holding my family. I know he won't hurt the kids, but he must be looking for me. My chest tightens with the knowledge that my own brother may just be the one who tried to sell me into a lifetime of sexual slavery.

I need to think of a plan. Damian doesn't know I'm aware of the masquerade ball, and if my brother is there, if he had something to do with me being snatched and sold, if he's one of the men who sells humans for money, he's not going to like it when I show up at his little party.

* * *

I finish showering, towel off, brush my teeth, and throw on some clothes before going in search of Damian. I find him at the stove, standing over a pot of noodles, and watch fascinated as the muscles in his forearms flex with each lift of the pot filled with boiling water as he drains the pasta. I love the fact that he's cooking, but in all the clips I've watched it's always the woman, the submissive, who's cooking a meal for the dominant.

"You're making dinner? It looks and smells delicious, but shouldn't I be doing this?" I ask, sliding onto one of the barstools.

Damian turns the pan once more and sets it onto the stove and then turns to me. "Something else you learned researching BDSM sites, no doubt."

Just the tone of his voice keeps my eyes riveted to his. I nod and give him a little shrug. "Every site that I searched said a submissive does all the cooking, cleaning and, well, you know, a lot more. Her job is to provide the dominant pleasure."

The raised eyebrows lower, and he smiles, a nice wide smile just for me as he nods. "Bryanna, my submissive will bring me pleasure. I will demand that, but the way you do that is up to us, not to a prescribed set of rules. We make our own way, okay?" Damian says, leaning over the bar top and tilting my chin so that I have no choice but to look into his eyes.

I contemplate what he's said and nod. "So, let me get this straight. I don't kneel, I don't lower my eyes, and I don't cook for you."

His eyes light up with amusement. “You’ll kneel, Doll, and will do it immediately when I ask. And more often than not, it will be when I want to pleasure you,” Damian says, coming around the bar and grasping me by the waist to pull me to stand before him. He grazes my lips with his own, rekindling the warmth throughout my center. His fingers trail down the fine lace of the tank top he’s purchased, caressing my curves and dipping into the center of my cleavage.

“I seem to recall leaving you naked in my bed, yet here you are standing in front of me fully dressed. That will never do, Doll.”

Everything south clenches with desire. I swallow past the lump of embarrassment and desire his words cause. He unzips the hoodie I’ve thrown over the tank, folds it, and places it on the counter next to me. “Take off your shirt for me, Bryanna. I want you naked from the waist up when I feed you,” Damian says, and the desire in his voice sends shockwaves of pleasure straight to my nipples, which have already become erect and heavy with need.

I remove my tank and then reach behind me, but he gently captures my arms and nuzzles into my ear. “I’ll tell you what I want. Don’t try to anticipate my desire, Bryanna. I want the pleasure of unwrapping the rest of you myself,” Damian says.

Damian gently unclips my bra, slowly dragging the thin straps down my shoulders one at a time. He pulls the fine lace away from my body before allowing his finger to trail the length of my neck, past my collarbone, and over the swell of my breast to circle my nipple.

“So sweet, Doll,” Damian says, rubbing it gently with his finger, all the while watching me before lowering his lips to my nipple and suckling it with the warmth of his mouth.

I hear myself moan lightly. My body presses into him, but his strong hands snake up my arms to hold my shoulders still as he continues teasing, swirling his tongue and caressing me gently until the moisture in my center heats with longing. He alternates, caressing and teasing both breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers, gently increasing the pressure until I’m wavering between pleasure and pain and panting with fervent desire.

“So responsive and sweet, Bryanna. I think it’s time to feed you.” Damian picks me up and places me on the barstool before walking into the kitchen and returning with a healthy helping of linguine, full of aromatic sauce and shrimp. Damian places one plate in front of the two of us before he slides

onto the stool next to me. He twirls a small strand of linguine and places a forkful to my mouth, stroking my bare nipple while I chew.

He lifts the glass of red wine to my lips.

I take a sip of the delicious red. “Mmm, so good,” I murmur.

He places it on the counter and twirls another small forkful of pasta and brings it to my mouth slowly, watching me intently as he does. I tentatively take a bite, savoring the deliciously combined flavors of tomato, garlic, and Cajun spices.

Damian waits until I’ve swallowed before selecting a shrimp, and brings it to my lips. I place the tip of it in my mouth, tasting the delicacy and delighting in the way his eyes have begun to smolder. He alternates offering me a bite, giving me a sip of wine, and taking one for himself until the plate he’s prepared for the two of us is entirely gone.

He takes the dishes to the sink, opening the dishwasher beside him. “Can I do anything to help?” I ask, still relatively uncertain of what he wants, except clearly to have me half-naked in his kitchen.

Damian turns to me, and his eyes sparkle with delight. “You can go and sit on the couch and take a look at the documents on the coffee table. I’m interested in your thoughts, and of course, watching you while you do as I ask,” he says, as my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

“You want me to go read documents half-dressed?”

“I do, it would please me very much,” Damian says, and that deep voice sends tingles down my center and straight to my toes.

I nod and stand to do as he’s asked, trying not to look at the floor as I walk to the couch in the adjoining living room. The embers of the fire are still going, and the warmth has heated the soft leather of the couch. I settle onto it, feeling completely exposed and on display as the growing sense of anticipation spreads.

“Just take a look at the pictures on the table, and let me know if there are any other places you frequented or that mean something to you that I’ve missed.” The documents are all laid out and categorized. I gaze at each of them, one by one. Our family home, Aunt Jenny’s rental house, my school, and then pictures of me. After a while, I sense the heat of his gaze, and turn to find him watching me, his eyes smoldering with unhidden desire.

Damian walks toward me, sits on the couch, pulls me onto his lap, and wraps me with a blanket before reaching for another folder. “These aren’t going to be as nice to see, but I need to make sure we have as much

information as possible,” he says, opening the folder to the first picture. It is of one of my captors, and I read the description of his last arrest record while Damian pulls me closer and adjusts the blanket around my shoulders.

“Anything you need me to know about him or any of the others in these pictures?” Damian asks, stroking my cheek.

While they may not have touched me, a protected virgin, I saw the way they looked at me and heard the stories from the other girls who weren’t so fortunate, and my stomach tightens with the memory.

“They’re evil, Damian. The way they looked at me, the way they hit and grabbed the other girls, in plain sight. They would have done that to me too, if I weren’t being labeled for the sale.”

Damian’s eyebrows raise. “Labeled.”

“You know, a virgin, so everyone knew that they couldn’t touch me. Layla said the boss was marketing me as a V-card baby, so no one touches or soils the product in any way. She told me I just had to hang out until the auction. The other girls didn’t seem to care too much for me, except for a few, but she was really nice. She sort of took me under her wing the first couple of days, and then she had me move in with her. I really should call her and let her know I’m okay.”

His eyes go dark, and I can almost feel the blood beating in his chest as his arm wraps around me, and he pulls me closer. “Nothing like that will ever happen to you again. You have my word, Bryanna, and you can call your friend when it’s safe to do that,” Damian says, kissing me on my forehead before pulling back to look me directly in the eyes.

“I was one of the lucky ones. They didn’t do the things to me that the other girls had to endure, but I was still so scared.” I don’t tell Damian, but the thought that my brother is one of those people, someone who wanted to sell me, is more than my tender heart can take. The tears I usually try to hide, but lately seem to have a mind of their own, begin to slide down my cheeks faster than I can blink them back or wipe them away.

“Let your tears fall, Bryanna,” Damian instructs, brushing his lips across my own as he continues to wipe the tears I miss, caressing my back until they begin to subside.

“I’m really sorry,” I sniff. “I must seem like a complete mess to you.”

He wipes the remaining remnants of tears from my cheeks and kisses my lips as I inhale his scent and nuzzle into his chest. “It’s completely natural after what you’ve been through. I’d be worried about you if you weren’t

letting it out in some way.”

I nod, because I feel so much better after a little cry, just a way to vent and release some of the pent-up fear I’ve felt for the past few weeks, but now a new emotion is forming, an even stronger one. The brother who grew up with me, was raised side by side with me, and who I loved with all my heart is responsible for everything that I’ve gone through, and the anger toward him is building fierce and hot.

“You’re not in this alone anymore, Bryanna,” Damian says, bringing my attention back to him. “Don’t hide your emotions from me. You’ll share them with me so I can help you through it, understand?” he asks, tilting my chin up slightly.

Damian’s had this entire time to tell me about my brother, but hasn’t said a word. He plans to deal with my brother without me, but Damian doesn’t know who the person is who wanted to buy me and was planning to pay millions to take my virginity. If my brother is involved with that network, it may not be just me the next time. It may be my little niece, or even my nephew, if the price is right. My family will never be safe until he is out of the picture, leaving me no choice but to look him in the eye and lie straight to his face. “I understand, Damian.”

Chapter 27

Damian

I smile down at Bryanna, so beautiful and peaceful. She's already starting to drift after her much-needed emotional release. I pick her up gently and carry her to my bed, place her on the mattress and cover her with a quilt. Her eyes open briefly, but then just as quickly as they opened they re-close as she begins to drift. All the emotions of the day are bound to be playing havoc with her, and I have no doubt she'll sleep right through the night.

I lean down and kiss Bryanna's lips, still salty from her tears. I inhale the fresh honey scent of her skin, and watch as her breathing becomes more regulated with sleep before I tear myself away from her to deal with the men in the pictures. The fuckers that even looked at her during her captivity have already been saved to memory. Just thinking about her situation makes my blood pound, and now we have the added complications of her brother to deal with.

I scoop the documents off the coffee table and head to the spare room, which will have to serve as an office of sorts for a couple days. I close the door before connecting with Murphy, who's been running point on the intel team. "I couldn't talk long earlier. What do you have on Bryanna's brother and each of the men from the club?" He rattles off an in-depth explanation to go along with the string of drug and extortion charges for each of the men.

I listen as Murphy runs through the details of those men and then flips over to a summary of Bryanna's brother's latest activities and whereabouts. As soon as he tells me that he's working for one of the most notorious bike associations in the southwest, my antennae go up, because that particular gang, while well known for their product, is also rumored to draw the line at human trafficking. I do a quick search and cross-reference it with a couple of

files Murphy has uploaded in the system, and settle on a recent image of Bryanna's brother.

"You ready for more?" Murphy asks.

"What else you got?"

"We found Ramiro, and you're never going to believe what we learned."

"Don't keep me in suspense, Murphy."

"He's running with the same gang, Dame. We tapped into the police records and investigation documents and were able to place both men with the same gang. They have their eyes on both Ramiro and Bryanna's brother and suspect them of trafficking."

The connection can't be coincidence, and before I've said a word, Murphy is confirming my suspicions. "Looks like we may have found our culprits. Although, one thing doesn't sit well yet. I can't find anything linking the gang they're in with trafficking, outside of the two of them. In fact, the report I have put that motorcycle gang in the middle of a rescue attempt with a large truck full of women who were being transported earlier in the year."

"Damn, Murphy. That's exactly what was running through my mind. I was just looking back at some old files to find that too. Things can change, but they were staunchly opposed to trafficking not that long ago. Their position has either drastically changed, or something else is going on. Can you keep digging?" I ask.

"Roger that. In the meantime, the masquerade ball is still on for ten tomorrow night, and we haven't found him yet. Every single name that was on the RSVP list Friday has accepted for Sunday night, so chances are that your very wealthy bidding opponent plans to make an appearance."

"I'll be working on a detailed plan tomorrow. Make sure I have all the intel I need before that time, and we'll be in good shape," I say.

"Will do. I'll get a report over to you as quick as possible so you have time to brush up on it tomorrow."

"Thanks, Murphy." Our intel team is the best on the globe, and every one of the security agents knows it. We couldn't do half the jobs we do without the information they are able to glean with their intelligence.

"No need to thank us; that's our job," Murphy says before signing off, leaving me staring at the four fuckers on my screen whose faces I've memorized, while focusing on the one that has Bryanna's eyes and smile, the one right in the middle of everything that has happened to his sister and my green-eyed Doll.

On impulse, I send Murphy a quick text message to find out what he can about the relationship her brother has had with his family. I already know the surface stuff—loser dad drifting in and out of the children’s lives, bad back after a nasty spill, always popping pills and partying—but there’s nothing substantial enough to make me want to break Bryanna’s heart after all that she’s been through.

The ping on my phone lets me know intel will work on it. I pull up a few more documents to review in preparation for tomorrow’s masquerade ball before calling it a night.

* * *

The next day, I roll over and open my eyes, finding Bryanna fully awake and watching me. Her cheeks pinken with embarrassment, causing my pants to strain with the erection she’s caused, just looking at her in my bed. The guilt I initially felt for crossing the line between protector and lover has quickly subsided, because I already know this is not just a quick little tryst with someone I’m paid to protect. The magnetism of what pulls me to her is far more than that.

“Morning, Doll.”

“Are you hungry?” Bryanna asks.

I glance at the time. “It’s almost eleven, and I’m starving. Would you like brunch or an early lunch?” I ask, settling onto my elbows to look at her.

“Hmm, I’m hungry too. We wore off a ton of calories last night and slept right through breakfast. I feel like my entire schedule is out of whack, but my body must have needed the sleep. I saw a container labeled with spicy chowder in the refrigerator yesterday. It sounds like a New Orleans dish to me, and I’d love to try it. I can heat some up and make grilled cheese sandwiches to go with it, if you like,” Bryanna says, smiling up at me.

“Chowder and grilled cheese sound fine, but I’ll cook,” I say.

She looks up at me with those expressive green eyes between those lush lashes, and her brow knits. “You’re positive that I shouldn’t cook, or at least help?”

I know she’s been reading and exploring websites that emphasize different dynamics, and it gives me pause; another reminder that she is young. It’s my responsibility to ensure that she has a good experience and

ability to explore her preferences. I already know how much she enjoyed being cooked for and fed, because I couldn't have taken my eyes off her dilated eyes, rapid pulse, and erect nipples if I tried. "Because you want to, or because you think you should?"

"I've always thought that it was the submissive's place."

I narrow my eyes at her, because we both know exactly where she got it from. "Where did you read that?"

Her cheeks pinken, but just slightly, giving them a perfect little glow. "A website that I searched. It gave all the highlights in bullet points. The ten top things that a sub should learn and know how to do."

I try to suppress my smile. She must have skimmed over the part where submissives get their little asses paddled for being dishonest. "I see. Well then, let me enlighten you a bit. There are many relationships where the sub cooks, cleans, and does many other things of the dominant's choosing, but that's because that act just happens to please that particular dominant, and his submissive is compatible. Are you looking for someone who will require you to cook and to clean? Do those things fill a need that you have to give, Bryanna?"

She doesn't answer immediately, but I can tell she's mulling it over.

"I can't read your mind, Doll."

Her eyes immediately lift and connect with mine. "I'm just not sure how to answer this in a way that's not going to botch things up. I do enjoy cooking, and it's definitely something I would like to do for you, but I absolutely loved when you cooked for me and fed me too. I adore how you take care of me and are always in charge," Bryanna says shyly.

My chest tightens with the knowledge that once again she isn't looking for a dynamic that I can't give her. She may not realize it yet, but she's just looking for someone to take the reins. This I can do, even accommodating her desire to cook at times.

We'll go slow, because I'm enjoying discovering the facets of Bryanna's submissive side immensely. "You can make an early lunch, and I'll make some coffee," I say, and she nods with enthusiasm.

"Sounds absolutely perfect! I'll get it started," Bryanna says, but I don't miss the little smirk.

I'll let Bryanna cook because she will enjoy it, but I can hardly let her get away with topping from the bottom, even if her attempt was absolutely adorable, and the fact that she wants to do something special for me makes it

even better.

“It would please me if you cooked for me with no clothes on, Bryanna. I’ll meet you in the kitchen,” I say, watching her cheeks heighten with a deep pink before turning and heading to the kitchen, looking forward to seeing how she’ll handle my request.

The coffee has barely started brewing before I hear the bathroom water turn off and the faint creak of the bedroom door. I turn and watch as Bryanna walks toward me completely nude except for the blush of her cheeks, the rosiness of her erect nipples, and the pale pink on her dainty toes.

Her hair falls and brushes across her bare breasts as she walks toward me. “You’re lovely,” I say, stroking a nipple as she gets closer, watching her eyes dilate with desire. I caress her gently, watching her chest rise and fall with her inhalations of breath as I begin to stroke both nipples at the same time. Bryanna arches her back, but she doesn’t push into my hands, and my cock swells with the fact that she’s holding back, allowing me to give her the pleasure that she seeks instead of taking it on her own.

I caress her nipples firmer, rolling them between my finger and thumb, and watch as her breathing shallows and she tilts her head back with pleasure. “Look at me, Bryanna. I always want to see your eyes when I’m pleasuring you,” I say, before grazing the soft warm seam of her mouth with my tongue.

She settles her eyes on me, doing exactly as I’ve instructed. My chest tightens watching the desire I see floating around her deep green eyes. That look is enough to send any man to his knees, but Bryanna also needs to learn about anticipation.

“Why don’t I pour us a cup of coffee while you get lunch ready,” I say, barely containing my resolve as I take in the look of pure disappointment on her face, before she quickly attempts to veil it from my view.

Bryanna doesn’t dwell on it, but instead moves past me and quickly refocuses on the tasks of making lunch. She opens the refrigerator, and it’s difficult to remove my eyes from the very exquisite curves of her body, that toned back, narrow waist, and those deliciously sexy hips that I want to sink my hands around. She leans in to reach for the soup, and her bottom raises toward me, and even though I should be making her wait, teaching her how pleasurable anticipation can be, it is an offering that is entirely too delicious to ignore, and I don’t.

I run my finger down her back, letting it trail between her cheeks, past the little button that I fully intend to explore another day, and into the center of

her heat. When I press the length of my finger into her, sliding against her walls, she purrs so sweetly, accepting her pleasure, once again, without pushing back or trying to take it on her own.

My cock twitches with need as with every touch and caress of her body, she responds so absolutely perfectly. I reward her by stroking and curling my fingers upward, finding the sensitive little bundle, watching her body's shiver of desire as I drive deeper into her heat, rolling her nipple between my finger and thumb. Bryanna's center clenches around me tightly the more firmly I press, letting me know exactly what she likes.

It is with great restraint that I finally stop teasing her and don't slide myself into her slick, wet heat. "If you warm the soup and make the sandwiches, I'll prepare the table and pour the coffee," I say, and am rewarded with a brief inhalation of breath that sounds more like a little huff.

I smile to myself, watching as she goes about cooking and serving our lunch completely in the nude and fully aroused. Next time, she won't be so quick to offer what she thinks I want instead of waiting for me to request it, so that I can reward her for doing exactly that.

I should be taking this slow, the exact opposite of what I'm doing. If I thought it was purely physical I would walk away; at least I believe I'd have the strength to walk away, but this pull, this magnetic attraction to every little smile Bryanna gives me, and the need to protect her, are all too much to deny.

So when Bryanna serves lunch in nothing but her delectably creamy skin, we eat, because she needs to regain her strength. But after our meal is finished, my desire can no longer be contained. I slide my barstool out and unzip my pants as she watches.

Her deeply set eyes go wide with lust as I wrap myself.

I pick Bryanna up and place her exactly where I want her, pulling her down on top of my lap until my cock is buried deep inside of my green-eyed Doll.

Chapter 28

Bryanna

He lifts me, and with one swift move all food is forgotten as he pulls me atop his incredibly rock-hard cock. It meets the end of me, all the way to my core. He lifts me by the waist, sliding me up and down along his length, creating a blissful desire before forcefully pulling me back down, developing a furtive need begging to be quenched hard and fast.

It feels so good, rubbing along my insides, building a need so intense and overwhelming that when after only a few more strokes he tells me to cum, I explode. He doesn't stop; instead, he continues to ride me on his lap, forcing my orgasm to go on and on. This joining is intense, and he's not far behind me, pumping into me a couple more times, growling his release deep inside of me before I collapse against his muscular chest, sated and breathless, as we both take a moment to regain our strength after the incredibly intense orgasms.

Damian lifts me and carries me to the bathroom, kissing me gently on the lips before setting me down on my own two feet. He turns on the shower, adjusts the temperature before grasping my hand, and assists me under the warmth of the cascading water to rinse off after our tryst.

"Turn," Damian instructs, guiding me with a slight touch to my shoulder to spin me away from him. He runs his fingers through my hair, pulling me back gently against the strength of his body, and holding me while the water cascades over my hair and down our bodies.

When my hair is saturated, he smooths the shampoo into it, massaging my scalp. He works his way through my hair to my nape, running his hands up and down my neck, causing those little tingles to intensify. "Damian, it feels too good."

“Tell me what you liked in the kitchen, Bryanna. I want to hear you tell me while I pleasure you again,” Damian whispers in my ear as he rinses the suds from my hair and lets them cascade down my body.

I should be embarrassed, ashamed that I’m not like most of the women that I know, but I’m not in the slightest. Damian has shown me exactly what I’ve been looking for. I’m not sure if I know exactly how to explain it. I contemplate my response, running it over and over in my head as he massages my scalp and neck.

“I want an honest answer, not some well-thought-out response that you think I want to hear; understand, Doll?” he says, removing the attachment from the wall and lowering the spray to massage my shoulders.”

I nod, swallowing down my uncertainty in exchange for my need. “I loved the way you took charge, even when I thought I knew what you wanted but clearly didn’t. I liked the way you made me wait, even though I didn’t want to initially.”

Damian strokes my cheek and kisses my lips gently as he moves the wand even lower, letting it graze my navel, circling until the anticipation makes me feel it in my center.

The intensity of his gaze is heated and draws my focus to his eyes. “That makes me tingle.”

“Tell me what’s tingling, Doll,” Damian coaxes, whispering in my ear as he moves the warmth of the shower water to my center. The spray grazes my mound, warming me with the gentle massage, but he turns it to pulse and parts my folds with a finger.

“Oh, it’s so good, Damian.” My hips move on their own accord, arching forward to feel the warm force of the water and excitement it’s creating.

“No, Doll, I give you your pleasure. You accept what I give. Can you do that, Bryanna?” he asks, keeping my folds parted with only the force of the water, rocking it back and forth and creating a raging need that’s screaming to be satisfied.

“Yes! Damian! Yes! Oh Damian!” I shudder through a release that he doesn’t let end until long after I’m completely sated and completely wrung.

His intense gaze hasn’t left mine, and his eyes are hazed with a deep desire that causes butterflies to form in my stomach. “That’s exactly the answer I was expecting,” he says with a wide smile. Now let’s get you out of here and dried off before I decide to have my way with you again,” he says, leaving no room for discussion as he reaches around the stone wall of the

shower and drapes me in the large cashmere towel he's pulled from the shelf.

"It's the softest thing I've ever felt," I say, snuggling into the warmth.

He pats the extra moisture out of my hair and gestures me closer to the vanity, where he pulls out the blow-dryer. I stand mesmerized, watching him in the mirror as he gently dries my hair. When he's done, he unwraps the towel from around me and pats the few remaining patches of water away before kissing my lips and carrying me to his bed.

"I need to work the rest of the afternoon, but I set up a laptop for you last night. You'll find quite a few reputable sites on the desktop. I'd like you to spend this afternoon going through them. Make a list of what you do and don't like, along with any questions that you have. It will help us sort through some of your preconceived ideas about submission."

He probably thinks I need a ton of work to be a good partner. "I'm not a very good submissive, am I? You can tell me the truth. It really won't hurt my feelings."

Damian leans down and kisses me. "I already told you—you're a perfect submissive. You've explored a bit and know some of your preferences, but you haven't had anyone to introduce you to the lifestyle; not to mention that you're young, Bryanna. I want you to be sure that a relationship like this is what you are truly interested in exploring. Dynamics aren't carved in stone; they can be as individual as each of us. It's the dominant's responsibility to explore and learn the submissive's desires and to provide that experience, if they are compatible."

If we're compatible...

"Do as I ask. Spend the day going through this material while I work. Tomorrow we can talk, and I'll go through your list. Just be completely honest, Bryanna. If I still believe we're compatible, we'll spend the next few days together exploring your desires. I'll teach you and make sure your experience is everything that you dreamed it would be."

I nod, considering what he's said while his penetrating gaze causes my skin to heat and my eyes to lower as I've seen on the websites, but it doesn't change the facts.

"Doll, I know what you've read and seen in the submissive forums, but your eyes stay on me, not on the ground. I want to see every single emotion that passes through them when I'm talking to you or we're in a scene. Pretty much anytime, unless I ask you otherwise. Understand?"

I nod, one silent lie.

“I have a conference call and will be working in the spare room, and more than likely straight past dinner, but there’s plenty in the refrigerator. Make yourself at home, and I’ll check in on you a little later in the night,” Damian says, giving me a gentle kiss before leaving and closing the door behind him.

I may have other things to do, but I can’t help my blatant desires. I don’t waste a minute after he’s left before opening the laptop he’s placed on the table for me. I am completely absorbed within minutes, spending much of the afternoon perusing the sites and links he’s put together for me. It’s already late afternoon by the time I close the device, unable to look at it further. Every single site makes me sadder and sadder. These people have relationships I can only dream about, because after tonight, Damian will never look at me the same.

I switch focus to concentrate on my plan, because there is much to do to ensure my family remains safe from the monster who shares my name. I start in on the work I’ve outlined in my mind and only take a couple breaks to go to the bathroom and make myself a sandwich for dinner. I’ve been steadily planning well into the night when the phone they gave me vibrates with a message from Layla.

Dereck, Damian’s friend, told me that you are safe. Do not try to connect with me at this number after tonight. I’ll send you an email with my contact info once I get settled. Love, Layla.

I’ve just put up the laptop when I hear Damian’s footsteps approach, and the door opens. “I need to go out for a little while, Bryanna. It shouldn’t be for more than a few hours, and I’ll wake you when I return,” Damian says, walking over to me and kissing my lips before pulling the cover over my naked frame.

When the door closes, I listen to the footsteps and hear the door to the penthouse open. As soon as I hear the click of it closing, I slip out of the bedsheets and scramble to get into my clothes. I rummage through my purse to find the credit card that managed to stay tucked away, hidden in the zipper pocket. I let my fingers trail over the name on the card. Damian Moletti. I swallow down the sadness that I won’t be here when Damian returns, but I know exactly what I need to do, and if I wait any longer it may be too late. As soon as I reach the door, guilt riddles me and I turn, head to the kitchen, and find a notepad on the counter.

Dear Damian,

I had a wonderful time with you. I hope that when you return you won’t

be too disappointed in me. I need to do this, or I'll never be able to rest, and my family will never be safe. PS- I still have your credit card; they took your money and gun, but I will repay every single penny! I promise!

I struggle for all of two seconds with how to sign the note. Affectionately, passionately, or hopelessly in lust all sound better than love, which it is way too soon to be feeling, but it's the first word that popped into my mind and the only one that seems to accurately reflect how I feel.

He's had enough baggage to deal with since trying to find me, and there is no way that I'm going to be the immature girl who throws out the love word this soon. I'm sure he treats all his ladies like princesses. I should just be glad he chose to spend the night with me, made my first experience extra special, and was even willing to spend a few more days teaching me about the lifestyle. In the end, I sign a quick *Bryanna* and head for the door.

The private elevator heads right down to the street entrance, and with a quick show of my hand, a cab pulls up to claim his fare. "Where you heading?" the driver asks, resetting the meter as he pulls out into the evening traffic.

"Party Haven. It's a bit across town. I need to stop there for a few moments, and if you wait for me, I'll put an extra fifty on the tip," I say, cringing at the thought of my earlier theft from Damian.

"You got it, but fifty bucks isn't gonna get you a lot of time. I have bills to pay," the cabbie says, swerving into traffic, getting us honked at in the process, and then shifting lanes and cutting someone off before gunning it through the next set of lights.

Dear lord, I've hired a crazed lunatic for a driver. "I'm in a hurry, but getting there in one piece would be a good idea!" I huff.

The driver gives me a wide smile in the mirror, and his front tooth is missing. "You're safe with me, miss! Never been in an accident in my entire life," he says, slamming on the brakes before we barely miss crashing into the back end of a bright red pickup truck.

"Get a move on, asshole!" he shouts through the open window to the driver as he veers around the truck and then zigzags to get back into the lane we just left. I have a slew of not-so-nice things to say about his driving, but I hold my tongue, deciding his attention is much better focused on the road. Instead, I pull on the strap of my seat belt to make sure it's fastened securely.

In less time than is legal, we are pulling up outside Party Haven, and I start to open the door. "Hey, you have to pay first! Then I'll wait for you!"

“Fine, but if you take off I’m going to turn your crazy ass in for driving like a fricking lunatic, got it?” I say, giving him my best glare while swiping Damian’s card through the credit card machine attached to the back of the passenger seat.

“I’ll be here. The clock is running, so get a move on before I change my mind and go make some real money,” he growls as I get out and head into the little store.

The boutique is an absolute treasure trove, and I immediately see just the type of wear that I need toward the back. The real dresses, not the little paper things that most people buy for a quick costume party, but the real stuff that the escorts buy. Long, slinky dresses and high heels, and yes, exactly that mask! In less than ten minutes I’ve managed to squirm into the long pink dress that exposes my left leg right up to my hip, and have slipped into the strappy silver sandals and white mask adorned with silver. I turn to give myself one cursory glance in the mirror. I’ll blend right in, and they’ll never see me coming!

In another five minutes, I’ve convinced the sales clerk to cut the tags and let me wear the merchandise out of the store. I swallow slightly as I use Damian’s credit card again to pay for my extravagant purchases, before heading to the shop next door where I’m betting you can get whatever you need for the right price, including a gun with no ID or background check.

The cabdriver’s eyebrows lift when I slide into the back seat of the car. “Damn, girl, you sure do clean up nice,” he says with obvious appreciation.

I can’t help but smile at the man. “Eyes on the road,” I scold as he veers into traffic, getting us honked at again while my seat belt pulls me back into the cold vinyl seat of the cab for the ride across town.

It takes less than twenty minutes, a trip that legally probably takes double that, if not more. As soon as we stop, I decide that someone needs to know I’ve been here in case something goes wrong with my plan, and having a ride at the ready would not be a bad idea either. “Hey, tell you what. If you wait half an hour for me, I’ll give you two hundred bucks. All you have to do is go around the corner of the building, out of sight, sit there and wait for me.”

“You got it, but you pay first, and if I don’t see the whites of your eyes in thirty minutes, I take off.”

“No, if you don’t see the whites of my eyes in thirty minutes, you remember my face, what I look like what I was wearing, and you go to the police and tell them my name. It’s Bryanna Foster. Got it?”

He turns to look at me real good and nods. “You better not be getting me into something crooked, little lady. I don’t need no heat! I’ve been clean for more than five years, and I ain’t looking to tangle with no cops.”

“I’ll be back; nothing’s going to happen to me,” I say, closing the door. He pulls away and turns right at the corner. I wait, and the lights go out as he parks. I take a deep breath and head toward the front entrance, feeling better that at least someone knows where I am, and even guiltier that I didn’t tell Damian before he left.

At the end of the day, he is paid to protect me, and there is no way he would allow me to walk into this bar and do what I have in mind, and perhaps I should heed that little voice, but it’s far too late for that, and I don’t.

The bouncer at the door is big and makes me cringe. I’ve seen him back at the club in Chicago, and I know for a fact that he doesn’t mess around, but he’s never seen me. When the girls told me to steer clear of him, I took that advice straight to heart and hightailed it out of there whenever I even saw his back.

“You gotta invitation?” he asks.

“Bee from Bee’s Massage said that I wouldn’t need a pass to get in, just to give you her name at the door. I’m a gift,” I say, swiping my tongue seductively against my lips.

“Fuck, too bad she didn’t send you to me, honey. Get your ass in there, maybe we’ll meet up later,” he says.

“Perhaps,” I say, opening the door to enter.

The room is already starting to fill up with masked men, and the little hairs on the back of my neck tingle with trepidation, making me thankful I had the foresight to get dressed up and wear a mask. The security in this establishment are lined up against the wall, all wearing black suits and crisp white shirts, and have automatic Uzis at the ready.

I put an extra little sway in my walk, making my way past the entrance and letting my eyes adjust to the dimness of the lighting as I scan the room. The entire hall has been decorated in the masquerade theme, and it takes me less than ten seconds to find the traitor son-of-a-bitch who everyone but me now calls my brother.

Chapter 29

Damian

It takes me thirty minutes to get to the hotel we're planning to use as a communication station and to get dressed for the night. The last thing I need is for Bryanna to question where I'm going for the evening and worry about its impact on her family.

"You know Bryanna's brother may not know who you are, but your bidding opponent's going to recognize you the minute you walk into that damn room," Cole says, leaning against the door frame of the bedroom as I shift my tie and then fasten my cuff links.

"Can't be helped. I was going after him on his yacht anyway; no time like catching the bastard in the act. You know as well as I do, the girls in these auctions aren't up on those stages of their own free will. Fucking coercion, plain and simple. We need to get pics of every girl in that place. I'm glad you had the foresight to have Brian give you guys a few extra invitations. If we don't help all the girls tonight, we're going to wish we did, once Marenah gets through with us," I say.

"Yeah, Matt has his hands full with Wildcat," Cole says, and he should know. He spent the entire night guarding her when we were tasked with keeping her away from the Chicago Mafia and before she and Matt became a thing.

I laugh at the nickname she was given, and rightly so, after the men saw her in a bar fight, helping to save Matt's life. She can definitely hold her own against the best of them. "If you don't get what she wants, you're not going to be laughing tomorrow," I counter, and he has the good grace to shut up. He knows she'll harass his sorry ass until she has a picture of each and every one of those girls so she can cross reference them in the database that her division

uses to find victims of trafficking.

“Yeah, she sure would. That’s no lie. Now quit primping, pretty boy, and go find our man,” Cole says.

I laugh to myself at his humor, but it’s short-lived as he turns to answer an incoming call. This is one of those times that we have to prevail. There is absolutely no room for even the slightest of errors, because these fuckers have billions of dollars on their side. There are tons of these deviant bastards out there, men who want a virgin who will do what they want without question. Or even worse, an unwilling virgin, someone who will put up a fight and that they can hurt as they take her innocence. The thought that Bryanna could have easily become one of these women sends a cold chill down my spine and steels me for the night to come.

“Let’s get this party started,” I say, walking past the men in the living room and heading down to the sleek, dark limo that Brian has had provided for us. I climb into the back seat, Matt and Cole slide into the middle, and Keith hits the gas.

When we reach the bar, they let me out as rehearsed. I pull the invitation, which intel and Brian have collectively been able to acquire, out of my pocket before walking up to the entrance.

The burly bouncer looks me over as I hand him the invite. He barely glances at it before gesturing me past him and toward the entrance. The club is a high-end establishment, and these people pull in billions with this operation, yet security is barely in existence.

I noticed it at the last auction too, and shake my head at such lackluster precautions, but this time when I walk through the double doors, something’s different. I know exactly why they don’t need metal detectors, pat searches, or any other such nonsense. Tonight the club wall is lined with men carrying Uzis, and by the looks of them they would rather put a round of bullets in someone than be bothered with asking a question first.

I make my way to the bar at the other side of the room, settle into the round leather stool, and order a drink from the bartender. When he returns and sets the bourbon in front of me, his eyes hover just a little longer than normal.

“You look familiar. New to the party?” he says, wiping down the bar in front of him.

“I am. In fact, I was just about to ask you when things started livening up,” I say, taking a swig of my drink.

“It’s early, man. The real action doesn’t start for another hour or so,” he says, giving me a wide, bright-toothed smile.

“Ahh, well, I think I’ll mingle with the other poor souls while we wait on the beauties,” I say, sliding off the barstool with my drink at the same time my phone vibrates.

I pull it from my pocket and read one word.

Bathroom.

I head to the men’s room, and Matt and Cole are each standing at one of the sinks and see me in the mirror.

“The fuck?”

They both turn at the same time, but no one says anything for more than a half a minute, and by my clock that’s twenty-five-fucking seconds too long.

“What gives?” The plan didn’t include them being inside of this building yet, much less the fucking bathroom.

Matt and Cole start to speak at the same time, but then Matt defers to Cole. “Look, man, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but the team keeping an eye on Bryanna? Shit, it’s a long story, but she’s here.”

“Come again?”

“She left your apartment shortly after you did, and the team followed her to a party store and another shop, and then she came here.”

“The fuck? How long has Bryanna been running around in the night without any protection, and what the hell was she doing at a party store?” I ask, my head spinning with thoughts of her out in plain sight of any of the dozen men that want to kidnap her so they can give her to the man who lost the bid. And he’s here tonight, and now she’s here too, and no one said a word! “What the fuck!” I growl.

“Hold up, man. We’ve had eyes on her the entire time. We were able to track her through your ring.”

“Why didn’t the team tell me, and why the fuck did you let her come here?”

“It was my call, Dame. I knew you had enough on your plate, and we had to find out what she was up to. Damian, she has your credit card, she’s been charging the rides, then the clothes, the shoes, all the jewelry, and the gun,” Matt says.

“What are you telling me?” I say, my chest tightening with the thought that perhaps I’ve missed something important and that she’s here for a specific reason. If so, I don’t have a clue in the fucking world what that might

be.

“We don’t know exactly what’s going on yet, Dame, but Bryanna would have spotted you in a heartbeat, and whatever she’s doing, she clearly doesn’t want you to know, or she would have told you herself, right?” Matt asks, and as always, it’s hard to argue with his clearheaded logic, especially at a time when my chest is pounding like a fucking freight train.

My blood is racing with anger. What the hell does she think she’s doing in this pit I just rescued her out of? What doesn’t she understand about how these people operate? And why the hell would she meet up with her brother, unless she didn’t have a choice, but why here? It doesn’t make any sense. “I need to find out what the hell is going on.”

“Give us a few minutes before you walk out, and we’ll cover you. Jay has another team surrounding the perimeter.”

“Roger that,” I say, counting down the seconds and then minutes before I know it is reasonable to walk back into the ballroom. More men have arrived, and the tables have begun filling up while waitresses in scanty skirts with no tops take orders.

I walk to the other side of the room, scouring it for Bryanna. The lady with dark, wispy hair and dressed in pink with a white-and-silver masquerade mask turns sideways, confirming my suspicion. It’s my Doll, but she’s on the other side of the fucking club, standing by the bar with her no-good brother, Kade Foster, glued to her side.

I’m just reading a message from intel and digesting what it means when the hairs on the small of my back begin to prickle.

“Enjoying the view? She is quite captivating, isn’t she?”

I’d recognize the sound of that slimebag’s voice anywhere. I turn slowly to face my adversary, the one who wants Bryanna for himself, the one who is in the same fucking room as my green-eyed Doll.

“I’d take a real good look, my friend, because after tonight she’ll belong to me. You may have stolen her virginity, but there are many things I intend for her to learn from me alone.”

This man now stands between me and Bryanna and her no-good brother, who’s probably been paid a fortune to lure her here just so he can hand her over to the man in front of me. “There’s not a chance in hell that you’re taking her anywhere, asshole.”

He laughs. “I have to give you credit. You have the balls of an elephant, speaking to me with such disrespect. I wonder what they’ll look like sitting

on my mantle when my men cut them off? That's the way we deal with people who get in our way, and you are not only in my way, but have taken something valuable to me. Should I perhaps make her pay for your sins too, I wonder?"

My jaw tightens, but I manage to hold my tongue and bide my time.

He raises his hand. "No need to answer. Of course I will."

The self-satisfied smile, just like the show of men with Uzis, is meant to intimidate me, to add to the illusion that he and this organization have everything tied up. He would do well not to celebrate so early, because I have no doubt the minute he was within five feet of me, my team has had him in their sights and are working on a plan to wrap this up. I should wait, let them do what I would do if the shoes were reversed, but this is the same man who dares threaten Bryanna. This shit is personal, so I fucking don't!

My fist connects with that smug looking face, and then again before he even has a chance to react. I grab his lapel before he goes down, turning to keep him upright. After the beat-down I intend to give him, he'll learn never to even think about my green-eyed Doll. As we spin, I see her walking out the fucking door and discard every other thought except getting to her as fast as I can.

Bryanna's on her way out the back door! Find out what's going on!

Roger that!

I text out another message to the team outside to send me an update ASAP, but I needn't have bothered, because at the very same time I hit the send button, one single gunshot fires through the night, sending a shockwave of fear through every nerve in my body.

Chapter 30

Bryanna

As soon as I see my brother across the room, my heart begins to race with fear. If he had anything to do with my kidnapping and the threat of harm to his own children, my innocent little niece and nephew, I will end him. I won't feel one bit bad about it. I will not allow him to hurt my family, and if this is the only way to prevent him from doing that, so be it. I walk toward him with my hand on my purse, and the steel beneath it gives me the strength I need.

I reach him, and he has the good grace not to even pretend, so I hit the recorder in my purse, thankful to the shopkeeper for finding this little treasure for me in the back of the store where no questions are accepted.

"I know why you're here, Bryanna, and we need to talk."

"I don't have a damn thing to say to you! How you can do this to your family makes me sick!"

He wrinkles his brows like he's confused. "Listen to me, Bryanna," he says, but I shut him down, pulling out the pistol I've managed to buy, but keeping it close to my body and out of sight from anyone who may glance too closely.

"Not a word. Head for the door, and I'll be right beside you. One sudden stop, one word, and so help me God, I'll shoot you where you stand."

Kade looks like he's going to say something and thinks better of it, his jaw locking tight as he does as I've asked.

I stay glued to his right side, making sure he knows exactly where that gun is pointed. Kade marches to the back door with me. As soon as we're outside and out of eyesight, and partly secluded by some of the long tree branches, I turn to him. "I want answers. I want the truth, goddammit. I deserve that much," I say, gesturing him further back into the trees.

“Deserve to know what? I got a call from a buddy of mine who said you were out here in the city stripping, and that you would be here tonight trying to sell yourself to the highest bidder. What the hell, Bryanna?” my brother says.

I poke him in the chest with the gun, absolutely infuriated. “No, you’ve been doing what you want: selfish, not taking responsibility for what you do, getting into trouble and not even taking care of your own kids, and you want me to believe you came here to help me? Who the hell set me up? Who the hell knew that if they held your children over my head that I’d do anything they wanted; who the hell knew that?” I ask.

“I did,” a deep voice from behind me says, startling me so bad that I almost drop the gun from my trembling fingers. I turn and look from him to my brother and then back again to the gun the man is holding.

“Ramiro, you son of a bitch. I should have killed you when I had the chance,” my brother says.

“Well, your buddies and that biker gang you run with almost succeeded in doing just that. Beat the hell out of me, busted all my ribs, my nose, and then left me for dead. Too bad for you they didn’t succeed. You see, it just thoroughly pissed me off. You know what happens then? I get even, and tonight we’re going to square up, because the way I see it, you owe me every dime I lost when you turned me into Pres for running girls, along with all the money I lost while I was healing up.”

“I don’t owe you shit!”

“That’s not how I see it, and I plan on making up my losses by earning a nice little tidy sum for your sister’s ass.”

I lunge at Ramiro, but I’m not quick enough. He steps back and trips me, causing me to fall in a pile at his feet. I grab his ankles and try to topple him over, but he laughs and kicks me in the ribs.

My brother has a gun pointed right at him, but Ramiro aims his own gun at my face. “You really wanna take that bet? She’d be dead before I hit the ground. Toss it on the ground,” he says to my brother, who reluctantly does what he says.

“You really should’ve taught your sister some manners,” Ramiro says, laughing. He looks down for a moment.

My brother lunges at him, and Ramiro takes a shot, shooting straight past my brother’s head. One warning, before turning his gun on me. “Another step and so help me God, I’ll shoot this bitch right where she lays. Don’t think I

won't. She's more trouble than she's worth, and dead or sold, I get even with you," Ramiro says, keeping the pistol pointed down at me.

I'm still holding my gun, but he doesn't seem to have noticed, or perhaps doesn't think I'll shoot.

"I thought I was going to have to follow your brother for weeks before he led us to you. Imagine my surprise when I saw you walk up to the club, all dressed up for the occasion. Tonight you're going home with the man you were intended to leave with Friday. Seems whether you're a virgin or not, he's still got the hots for you. Something about making you a slave for all eternity," Ramiro says, laughing at me as my courage returns and my hand tightens around my gun, waiting for just that right moment.

He cackles and pulls his booted foot back to kick me again, and before I can pull the trigger, a whizzing sound flies above me, and the man jerks back with the impact of the gunfire and lands in a heap right in front of me.

Damian rushes across the parking lot. The gun is still in my trembling hand, and he takes it from my grasp, tossing it to another man who has joined him. What's his status, Cole?"

"He's down for good," Cole says, checking the pulse of the lifeless man lying on the ground in front of us.

Damian scoops me into his arms and presses me against him before standing me on my own two feet. My brother starts to move closer, but Damian steps between us, and it's only now that I see that he is armed.

"You'll excuse me if I don't trust you with your sister quite yet. Our intel has it on good authority that you're working undercover, but those boys you're running with are bad news, and I'd rather not have Bryanna mixed up with that mess. We'll keep your identity safeguarded in any of our reports, but I'd get moving before the police get here if I were you. The danger to your sister and the rest of your family from this asshole is over, but your friend Ramiro's put her in grave danger with one of the wealthiest men in the world, and me and my team still need to deal with that."

"I can't talk here, but I'd do anything to make sure no one hurts my sister."

"I appreciate that you put your cover and life on the line to help Bryanna. That tells me a lot more about your character than anything I've seen in the police records. We'll be in touch, you can count on it, but in the meantime, you better get going before your cover's blown to shit," Damian says, sliding his arms underneath me to pick me up again.

“I can manage, Damian. I’m okay, really,” I say, even though every breath feels like my ribs are about to explode and he’s already started to situate me in his arms.

“Bryanna, I’ll explain everything to you at some point. Just know that I love you, and I’ll be back with you and the family when it’s safe. For now, it’s better that I stay as far away as possible,” Kade says, turning and walking quickly away.

“Damian, we can’t just let him leave like that. He had a gun, he was going to shoot that man for me,” I say, and then the reality of it all, that I thought my brother was the one who set me up, and what I said to him comes crashing into my thoughts. “I can’t let him leave this way, Damian. I said awful, awful things,” I say, while tears of remorse cascade down my face.

“You didn’t know, Doll. Kade knows you were only reacting to the image that he portrayed to you and the world,” Damian says, pulling me even tighter to his chest.

“Cole, you mind running point with intel while I get Bryanna situated?” he asks.

“Don’t mind at all. In fact, Marenah still needs a few more pictures, so I’ll get those while I’m waiting for the clean-up crew,” Cole says, heading toward the bar door while Damian carries me to a black limo that’s been pulled up not far from us.

A man I haven’t met before opens the back door for us, waiting while Damian situates me into the car, and then closes it before getting into the driver’s seat. “Where’s Keith?” Damian asks the man.

“He’s a bit tied up at the moment, and I know my way around New Orleans, so he asked me to drive for you.”

“Thanks, Garrett,” Damian says, pulling the seat belt around me. I wince as his hand glances over my ribs, and he scowls. “Let me feel,” he says, running his fingers across my ribs, causing me to suck in my breath. “They’re not broken, but you’ll want to stretch the muscles around them, even if it’s a little uncomfortable at first, to keep the area from tightening up. Let’s get you back to Chicago and situated,” he says as Garrett pulls out of the parking lot.

“Damian, it’s seriously nice of you, but you can drop me off at a hotel. I can get some rest and then get a flight out and stay with my mom and the kids until everything blows over,” I say, knowing that he must surely be tired of all the drama that I’ve brought into his life, especially after this little stunt.

His eyes darken and his mouth twitches. “That’s not how this is going to

play out, Doll, not even close.”

“Hey, Damian. It looks like we may have a tail following us right out of the gates. Once we get past the guards, I’ll put a little distance between us and see if they turn off or stay with us,” Garrett says.

“Roger that, man. I’ll let the team know, while you keep your head in the game. If they pull you over at the gate, drive right through the fucking thing. A team’s in place behind our tail, and aerial will have a clean shot of the fuckers once we’re through,” Damian says.

We have a short way to go before we reach the gates that encompass the private parking lot, and the lights atop the guard station suddenly begin to flash red, and the long wooden gates begin to lower.

“You good, Garrett?” Damian says.

“Roger that! You guys hang tight,” Garrett says, stepping on the gas, causing us to careen through the parking lot and bust right through the thin slats of the gate that must have been created more as a scare tactic than for any real ability to keep a car inside of it.

“Great job, man,” Damian says as we come out the other side, and Garrett slows to gain control and then punches the gas again, weaving in and out of the cars that dot the main strip.

“We’ve got positive IDs on several of the men in the club, and the teams are going in. Aerial won’t show themselves yet, but they’ll be on standby if we need them,” Damian says as he finishes pounding a message into his cell.

“Roger that. Garrett slows momentarily with congestion. “You guys hang onto your seats. As soon as I see a break in the traffic, I’m going to lose these ... ah, here we go folks,” Garrett says as the car surges forward, and we’re soon right on the bumper of the car in front of us. The car coming toward us on the left goes by, and Garrett floors the gas and steers the car into the left-hand lane. We’re heading straight toward an oncoming car that doesn’t appear to be slowing down at all. I screw my eyes closed and only open them when the car veers hard right, and my seat belt tightens around me. Garrett slows for a moment to duck back into the lane, and hits the gas again, heads to the exit, and then switches lanes to take an adjoining highway. He slows and then guns it again, and then jumps lanes as two more highways merge.

The speedometer registers ninety-seven miles an hour as we careen down the highway. Garrett expertly weaves us in and out of the lanes as we fly by most of the traffic like the other cars are sitting still.

“Great fucking driving, man! Jay’s running point on aerial and says to pull off at the Modessa exit and head for the truck stop,” Damian says.

“Roger that! I’ve had just about enough of these bastards,” Garrett says.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Damian says, his deep blue eyes focusing in on me.

I look away, and the touch of his finger on my cheek pulls me back to face him. “I thought we were clear on you looking away, trying to hide from me,” Damian whispers.

I glance nervously toward the front seat.

“Don’t worry about Garrett.”

I shrug. “I didn’t really think it pertained anymore. I mean, let’s face it. You had a job to do, and you did it. What happened between us doesn’t make you responsible for me personally,” I say with more calm than I feel, hoping that he can’t see the rapidly beating heartbeat beneath my clothing.

Damian narrows his eyes at me, and we turn off the main highway onto a deserted side road that leads us to a brightly lit truck stop, where Garrett pulls in to stop. Damian glances down at his cell as it begins to vibrate. “The guys have the men following us surrounded; they’re about to close in and wrap this up,” Damian says, just as we see a sleek helicopter with lights cut through the air. They’re not far away, and we can see the silhouette of men with guns pointing downward toward the road we just left.

“Do they need our help?” Garrett asks, and I blush, realizing he probably just heard every word I said.

“The teams have it covered for tonight, but if you’re still looking for work, I’ll talk to the group about signing you on,” Damian offers.

“Roger that, man. Greatly appreciated.”

“Matt’s wife, Marenah, has been working with Scottie, one of our security team you haven’t met, and he has connections over at Interpol and the FBI. They were able to run a match with the pictures we sent and found enough evidence on the dark sites to put this guy’s ass away for a very long time. They’re in the process of arresting the bastards, and I don’t think even his money will get him out of this,” Damian says.

“And the other girls?” I ask.

“They’re all safe, Bryanna. They’re being taken to the safe house Marenah and her team uses, and Dereck’s dealing with things back at the club in Chicago. I guess the job’s officially over,” Damian says, glancing at me as I try to keep my heart from breaking at the thought that he really has no

reason to be with me now, no longer my protector, and he no longer has any responsibility to me whatsoever.

Chapter 31

Damian

The minute I hear a gunshot outside the club, I fly by a waitress balancing a heavily laden tray of drinks, not giving two fucks about my cover, which has already been blown, or what anyone in the goddamn club thinks.

“Hey!” she yells, and not two seconds later I hear glass crashing behind me.

I don’t stop or even respond, too intent on getting through that goddamn door and onto the other side. I race like a madman across the room, not caring who the fuck sees me or what they think. I burst through the exit door and race toward the shadows in the woods just as a man with heavy boots raises his foot to kick Bryanna in the ribs. The blood in my veins pumps with rage, but turns to icy fear when I catch the shiny glint of steel pointed at my green-eyed Doll.

I stop cold, take aim, and then fire, and with one precise shot, that piece of shit is lying on the ground right beside her.

It takes me mere seconds to reach her. I take the gun from her trembling hands and toss it to Cole, slide to the ground, and pull her into my arms so that I can feel her heartbeat against my chest and her breath against my skin. My phone beeps, and I glance down at the message intel has sent alerting me that Kade Foster is on the inside, deep undercover for the feds. So deep, he’s one of the most trusted right-hand men in the bike organization he runs with. Well, fuck me!

The soft little whimper she makes when I adjust her lets me know that her ribs are at least bruised, if not completely fractured. The entire security team, men who are more like brothers to me, come out of the trees to completely surround us. They would have taken the shot if I hadn’t, but they needn’t

have worried, because I've never missed a shot in my life.

Her brother steps closer, and Kade may mean well, but I don't have enough intel on him to fully trust him. Until I do, he's not getting anywhere near Bryanna. If he's as deep undercover as our sources believe, it's better for him and everyone if he's not mixed up with what happened here tonight in case it would leak back to the gang he's infiltrated. I send him on his way while Nick calls for the clean-up crew who are always standing by when a job like this goes down, and in a city where crime never sleeps and there are more calls than the police can respond to, they have more than enough time to get in and out before anyone knows the difference.

I slide Bryanna into the car, and she winces. Her ribs will definitely be sore for awhile, but I can tell now that they aren't broken. I'd rather have her in my lap and pressed against me so that I can feel her heartbeat, but we may be in for a hassle at the gate, so I place her in the seat next to mine in the event I need to go for my gun.

The minute Garrett tells us we have a tail, I know it's someone who works for that fucking slimeball, the one who wants Bryanna for his very own, the one who seems hell-bent on getting her, whatever the cost may be. He's not getting anywhere near her, and if I have anything to say about it, he won't get near another woman in his lifetime either. When we finally get word the men tailing us have been fully apprehended, and they found a picture of Bryanna on the dashboard, my chest doesn't stop pumping until I hear the feds have him arrested and he's actually in cuffs and heading for jail. I know the man has billions, but this is Jenny's niece they're after, and I also know Brian Carrington. He has the funds to match, if not exceed this slimeball's, and he and I will do anything and everything in our power to keep that man behind bars for a very long time.

I look down at Bryanna, nestled in next to me. When I tell her the job is over, she looks at me and tells me that what we shared last night doesn't make her my responsibility. Clearly words are not enough to show her that she's not just another assignment or casual fling and that I've already claimed her for my very own, but she'll need to be shown what it will be like to be mine in every sense of the word.

Bryanna is quiet as we make our way to the airport. Her mind must be swirling with all that today has brought. I leave her to her thoughts, contemplating my own on the short drive.

She dozes a bit on the two-and-a-half-hour flight back to Chicago, but

remains completely silent once awake. It's not until we're near the exit that leads to my penthouse overlooking Lake Michigan that Bryanna turns and actually speaks to me. "Damian, I should clarify what I meant when I told you to drop me off at a hotel earlier. I can't afford the ones in this district. I meant somewhere less expensive. I don't even have a credit card to put it on, come to think of it," she says, and then her eyes widen and her forehead crinkles. "There's something else I should tell you, Damian. I left you a note back in New Orleans, but you probably didn't even get it. I used your credit card and spent a lot of money. I bought this dress and all the stuff I needed for the masquerade ball," Bryanna says softly.

"I'm well aware of your little shopping trip. One of the security details who swept the penthouse as we were leaving town sent me a picture of the note you left. We can add it to the list we need to talk about when we get home, because I have absolutely no intention of taking you to a hotel room, Bryanna. You still owe me a few days, and we're not nearly finished," I say, watching as her eyes widen and then her lips purse in thought.

"You want me to spend a few days with you?" she asks, stiltedly, almost unbelieving. I find it difficult not to correct her, but she believes she is just another job to me, and this is something she's going to need to experience in order to understand how wrong she is and determine if this dynamic is what she truly wants.

"I think that's what we agreed to, right?"

She glances down, and I feel a twinge of guilt, but only a small one, because she still can't get past the fact that I was paid to protect her and thinks that's all she is to me.

"I guess we're going to your place then," Bryanna says, leaning her head against the back of the seat as Garrett navigates the traffic of the city and pulls up outside the entrance to my high-rise. The valet is quick to open the door for us, and has started to assist Bryanna before I make it around the corner. I tell Garrett goodnight and ignore his smile, keeping my hand pressed against the small of her back as I guide her to the elevator.

She looks nervous as we enter the hotel. "Come, sit with me at the bar and have a drink," I say, taking her hand and then gently lifting her onto the stool. The long pink gauzy material of her dress parts seductively, displaying a creamy thigh right up to her hip. My cock hardens as I watch this woman, who looks at me with a need as great as my own, but with hesitancy and uncertainty.

I pour each of us a glass of wine and take a seat next to her on the barstool. “You left without letting me know what you were planning,” I say, trailing a finger down her arm and delighting in the little goosebumps that form along its path.

“I overheard you on the phone and knew you wouldn’t have let me go with you.”

“So you decided to take matters into your own hands and do what, kill your own brother?”

“I thought he sold me! I thought he was the one responsible for everything and for threatening me with the lives of the kids. I wasn’t going to kill him. I was going to get a recorded confession out of him and then turn him over to the police. But if I would have had to defend myself against him, I was prepared, and I fully intended to do whatever had to be done tonight to save my family!”

“But yet, I’m paid to protect you. Paid to keep you safe and out of harm’s way, and you let me walk right out that door without telling me, knowing exactly what you intended to do, didn’t you?”

She has the good grace to look as guilty as she is.

“Bryanna, as my submissive, you would never have done that. I can only surmise you heard me talking about your brother. When you did and became alarmed, you should have come to me and told me your fears. That’s what I would expect, do expect.”

“And you wouldn’t have let me go!” Bryanna says, wiping a tear of frustration from her lovely cheeks.

She’s not wrong. I wouldn’t have let her anywhere near anything that could have harmed her. “Correct, and as my submissive, you would have understood that I wanted to take care of you myself, to protect you from harm. I wouldn’t have allowed you to go until I knew you were no longer in harm’s way, and at every minute, of every hour this evening, you most definitely were in harm’s way.”

She starts to speak, and I put a finger to her lip to quiet her voice, along with her worry.

“I would have asked you to stay in bed. I would have given you a list of requests to keep your mind from that fear. I would have instructed you to soak in a bubble bath and then to pour yourself a glass of wine, before curling into bed naked with one of your favorite novels. When I returned home, I could tell you things were taken care of. I would have kissed down your body

until I found your center, and licked you until you were spent and all the worry of the evening was gone, but you didn't give me that chance, Bryanna."

I like the way her eyes have dilated and her breathing has shallowed, and even the look of remorse that flashes over her lovely features. When she crosses her legs, I smile. "Uncross your legs, Bryanna. Any pleasure you receive tonight, if any, will be mine to give."

Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, and my cock hardens at the prospect of doing exactly what I've told her I will do. "Now, doesn't that sound like a better way to spend the evening than racing around town with a cab driver? Oh, who, by the way, ended up being pretty decent. He and the shop owners were both paid quite a bit of money to forget you. He was more than a little confused that Cole wanted him to forget everything about you when you had explicitly told him to memorize every feature of your pretty little face and remember them."

She looks at the floor, and a tear slides down her cheek.

"Bryanna, I don't like it when you don't look at me. It feels like you want to hide from me, Doll."

She sniffs. "I told you, I'm not a real submissive. I can't even let my protector take care of me and do the job he's supposed to do."

"If you knew it would please me for you to stay home and let me take care of the situation this evening, would you have told me then? If you weren't thinking of me as the man paid to protect you, but as the man who wanted desperately to safeguard you for no other reason than the fact that he has fallen head over heels in love with you, would you have stayed then?"

That brings her face to mine, and her eyes widen, and more tears pool and spill from her gorgeous eyes as she looks up at me. "It would make a difference. I would want to do anything that you asked me," Bryanna says softly, and my cock throbs hard with the need to make this woman entirely mine.

"Then that makes you the perfect submissive, Bryanna. We'll talk more, but I think first you owe me a dance," I say, placing my hand behind her neck to pull her closer to me, so close that I can lick away the salt of her tears and kiss the sweetness of her lips.

Chapter 32

Bryanna

Damian stands and carefully lifts me from the barstool, pushing away a straggling piece of hair that has fallen across my face. He then places the white-and-silver mask on my face and secures it before putting on his own black mask and picking up the remote from the counter.

“Dance with me, Bryanna,” Damian says as he fingers the small remote. The lights in the ceiling dim, and the easy voice of Harry Connick Jr. singing his rendition of “It Had To Be You” begins oozing from the sound system overhead.

Damian holds out his hand and then takes mine as I offer it, placing his other hand firmly around my waist, pulling me close to his body, and gently guiding me to the slow, easy rhythm that washes over the room. The muscles in his thighs brush against mine with every stride, helping to guide and a gentle reminder that this man exudes power and is in absolute control of every step we take, both on and off the dance floor.

The music winds down, and Damian whispers into my ear, “It had to be you, Bryanna. The minute I saw your picture, that draw was already there, and after I saw you staring up at me from the bathtub, I should have known then that it was always going to end with you being mine.”

“I love that.”

“You need to fully understand what that involves, though, Doll,” Damian says as another song I’m unfamiliar with comes on. It has a slow jazzy sound, and he presses me against him, leading me in a gentle circle before spinning me around on my four-inch heels and then pulling me back into his arms.

His eyes are intense as he guides me to the sultry beat. “It means that I will always be there to support you in whatever you want to do in life. It

means that you'll do as I request and not what you think will please me. It means that when we're at home, you'll spend more time without clothes than in them; it means that when I ask you to kneel, you'll do it without question, and that you'll be treated like the priceless Doll that you are."

My breath catches as he speaks, because Damian's authoritative voice is so husky and velvety and his words send an electric energy straight through my body, causing it to pool in my center, but it's so much more than that. It's like he knows exactly what I need, and what my heart craves and desires.

Another song comes on, and Damian's hold tightens as he continues guiding me to the sultry tune. I look up at him so he can see all of me. "I thought you would think it was foolish of me to feel so much for you, so soon. Otherwise I would have told you last night. I love you, Damian."

His deep blue eyes have me captured in their gaze. "I love you too, Bryanna, and now it's time for me to show you how much," Damian says against the sensitive shell of my ear, before he steps back and spins me around, once, and then twice. "You're a beautiful and graceful dancer. Undress slowly, and then dance for me, Doll."

I suck in my breath, because that's the very thing I've been fantasizing about doing for him since he watched me dance in that bar. I envisioned just the two of us, with sexy, sultry music playing all around us, and my fantasy is about to come true.

He slowly unravels his tie, pulling it from around his neck slowly, watching me intently with those blue eyes. I reach behind me and unzip the little half zip that holds the silky dress to my waist while leaving the skin of my back otherwise bare. I slide first one strap down my arm, and then another, before slowly allowing the entire dress to slink into a pile on the floor.

Damian's eyes darken with desire, and he extends his hand to me. I place my hand in his palm, and he helps me step over the mound of material, and then spins me before him, dressed only in a white masquerade mask and silver high heels.

"Dance for me, Bryanna."

I let the music wash over me and then begin to gently sway to the rhythm, this way and that, stretching my legs to the beat, then my arms, first one, and then the other, raising them slowly into the air, elongating my body before slowly half spinning on the silvery heels. I bend slowly, presenting him with my bare cheeks as I touch the floor with my fingernails, and then slowly rise,

lifting my arms until my hands are clasped over my head. I turn into a graceful spin, around and around, just like a ballerina, until I eventually slow and come face to face with the deep blue expressive eyes of Damian.

“You’re absolutely breathtaking. Kneel for me, Doll.”

I suck in my breath, because only in my fantasies does this happen, something I’ve always dreamed of, and he’s slowly making each and every one of my dreams come true.

I do as he asks immediately and am rewarded with the smoldering of his eyes as he looks down at me. “Hands,” he instructs, and I present them to him.

He takes his time, wrapping the luxurious silk of his tie around my wrists, securing them with a bow, and then begins to slowly undress. My eyes are riveted, soaking in his taut muscles, the ones that ripple with every single move he makes. When he’s divested himself of clothes, he helps me rise and stand before him. He grasps me behind the thighs, lifting me up, and slides me back down, over the top of his bare cock as my locked wrists wrap around his neck, and he settles into a chair.

In this position, he sinks all the way to the end of me, and we are joined as closely as two individuals can be. He slowly raises me, up and down, watching me, and he drives so deep inside of me that I don’t know where he ends and I begin, only that the ache inside is building and building every single time he moves.

“Damian.”

“Yes, Doll. I want to hear you.”

“Damian, it’s so good. Please.”

“Please what, Doll?” Damian asks.

“More, please,” I beg.

He rewards me with deeper, more powerful thrusts, and he doesn’t stop driving until he sends me over the edge, and wave after wave of intensity wash over me. He thrusts three more times, extending my pleasure before releasing deep inside of me.

He tilts my chin up so that he’s looking straight into my eyes.

“You know what else being mine means?” Damian asks while we slowly regain our breath and are still joined as one.

“Tell me?”

Damian runs his index finger over the ring that’s been on my hand since the auction and removes it from my finger, showing me the inscription of his

name on the inside before returning it to my finger. “Being mine means that you will wear my family ring, which you already have. It also means that you will trust me above all others, and that you’ll wear my collar to let everyone know that you belong only to me. And when we’re ready, you’ll wear my wedding ring to let the entire world know that you are mine in every way that a woman can belong to a man.”

* * *

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* * *

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RELENTLESS

Via Mari

Chapter 1

Dereck

I slide out the back door and steal along the hedge-lined street, crossing the intersection before doubling back to a secluded spot behind a clump of bushes adjacent to the parking lot. I scan the area for anything suspicious, and satisfied with the inactivity, wait for Layla, the exotic dancer I'm to meet, secure in the knowledge that backup is minutes away if needed. It's almost noon when the '80s-model white-striped, blue Camaro my partner Damian described roars into the park's far entrance, flying into the lot, music blaring from the open window as it shoots into the corner parking space closest to me.

A beautiful woman with long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a pair of tight-fitting jeans, red high heels, and a matching lacy tank top gets out of her car. This must be Layla Contreras. She has to be the most exquisite creature I've ever seen. I watch as she scans her surroundings, searching for the man she's supposed to meet.

Holy mother of sin, she's hot.

She turns, examining the expanse of the park. I use that moment to walk out from the bushes and approach her from behind. Her body stiffens, sensing me, before spinning slowly and purposefully to appraise me. Her deep brown eyes take me in from head to toe, as I do the same. She purses her red outlined lips. "You're not Damian. Who are you, and what do you want?" Damian warned me the woman has sass, and that she does.

"I'm Dereck. I work closely with Damian. He's trying to protect Bryanna, the girl you know as Lacey. He thought you might have information that would help us. Her family believes she's missing, but we found her dancing at the club with you, and she doesn't want to go home."

Her eyes widen and then narrow into sexy little slits at me. “Wait, let me make sure I’ve got this right. No one would dance at a club like that because they wanted to, right?”

I level my eyes at the little spitfire. “I didn’t say that, nor mean to infer it.”

“You didn’t need to, papi. But don’t worry. See, I’m a big girl, and men like you don’t intimidate me. I can handle any shade you throw.”

My eyes lock with her gold-flecked orbs, catching just the slightest tremble in her lower lip. “I’m looking for the truth about Bryanna, not a runaround, and if you were mine, you’d show respect to someone trying to help your friend.”

She laughs out loud, a beautiful feminine sound. “I don’t belong to anyone, papi!”

“Clearly, but maybe you should.”

“Tell me, big man, what would you do if I were yours?” The beauty slides her wide-brimmed sunglasses onto the top of her head with the red tip of a well-manicured finger.

Layla’s biding her time, stretching this out, unsure of who I am and what to divulge about her friend, flirting as a way to delay a response. And that’s intriguing to me.

I rub the short dark hairs on my chin, contemplating what’s been on my mind since the fiery beauty first opened her sassy little mouth. “I’d have you wiggle out of those painted-on jeans, slip off your panties, and lay you across my knee to teach you the meaning of respect.” I leave out that when finished, she’d probably find herself on the end of my raging cock because I’ve hardly thought of anything else since her picture showed up in my email with instructions for this particular assignment.

Her sensual lips part wide in shock, accentuating the lovely, outlined mouth that I’d love to do unmentionable things to, but it’s Layla’s eyes that hold my attention. They’ve just gone hazy, and the bright gold flecks in the deep brown setting are dancing right in front of me. I observe them with interest for a few seconds before turning my attention to the rhythm on the side of her lovely neck, watching it pulse with the emotion she tries to hide.

Layla stays quiet, looking up at me with a perfect set of bedroom eyes, chewing her bright red lip, no doubt contemplating another sassy retort. I give her a minute, watching with growing interest. “We need information, Layla. Damian thought you might want to help your friend.”

She assesses me for a moment, and her lower lip trembles, just slightly, but I don't miss it. "I do, but you and your friend are putting me in a pretty crappy situation."

"Because you're sleeping with the boss?"

Layla's brightly colored lips now purse with annoyance. Her expressive deep brown eyes narrow, glaring at me from under those soft-looking all-natural lashes. "That's exactly why, and I'm afraid there's no way around that, papi. Anyway, I don't have time to play twenty questions. What is it that you think I can help with?"

I rub the hairs of my chin, taking her in, looking down at this beauty who's scowling up at me in her four-inch heels. "Then we won't play games. If you're sleeping with the boss, you may be privy to the information we need. If you give it to us, you have our word, no one will be the wiser, and our team will fully protect your identity."

Layla shrugs as if conceding to my request, but a look of sadness passes over her lovely features. "I tried to shelter her the best I could. I can't tell you anything about the boss or why she's at the club, but I can give you something."

"I'm listening."

"There's a masquerade ball on Friday. They have an auction scheduled for virgins, and they plan to auction Lacey—I mean, Bryanna—off to the highest bidder. My guess is the winners are all prearranged. I don't know a lot about the operation, but I do know everything they do is dirty."

My jaw locks tight. Traffickers. Time and time again, we run into these lowlifes who prey on young women, and they intend to sell this woman's friend, Bryanna, to the highest bidder. "Where is the auction being held?"

"Question of the day. They keep that information locked up tight," Layla says, looking away from me and out over the park. Her body turns rigid, and she turns to assess me for a brief minute. An emotion I can't quite put my finger on passes over her features. "The universe has eyes everywhere, even in this deserted old park, it seems. If anyone asks you about me, tell them your partner saw me dancing at the club last night, took an interest, followed me back to my apartment, and asked me to perform at a private party for him and his friends. I said no, so you followed me to the park and offered me five K. I told you that it was an offer of a lifetime but that I couldn't help you out. That's it, and stick to the story."

"Sure, we'll play it your way," I say, watching as her fingers repeatedly

rub over the metal of her key chain. I follow the line of her gaze, surveying a silver sports car turning to face us in the distance. Layla's delicate throat muscles tighten as she watches it, confirming what I suspected. "If you need help, tell me," I say, knowing that with one text, my partner will make this a party of three instead of two.

Layla turns her attention to me, and her flaming red lips purse in consternation. "No time," she says, spinning on a heel and lowering her delectable little body into the souped-up Camaro. She doesn't glance up at me; instead, she puts her foot to the floor, spoked rims spinning, tires squealing as she peels out of the parking lot.

I text Trent to pull around and get intel on the line, because that fiery little beauty and I are not even close to being done.

Our intel division is open twenty-four hours a day. They answer on the first ring. "This is Murph," one of our best field agents says.

"Hey, this is Dereck. I just met with Layla. It sounds like there's a masquerade ball on Friday. They have an auction scheduled for virgins, and they're planning to sell Bryanna. Layla told me she thinks the winner is prearranged, but she said she didn't know who it was or where this thing is going down. She was followed to the park by someone, so our conversation got cut short. If you can get this information to Matt and Damian, I'm going to see what else I can learn on this end."

"Consider it done. You need backup?"

"I don't think so, Murph. I'll take care of the situation," I say, pulling up the picture of the fiery little beauty. I notice that across the lot, the silver sports car has disappeared.

"Roger that, Dereck. Let me know if you need anything," Murph says.

"Will do; gotta run," I say, disconnecting as Trent pulls up to the curb. I jump into the passenger side of the black sedan. "You get a line on the Camaro?"

"Roger that, but she sped by pretty quick. She's probably heading back toward the highway."

"Any sign of a silver sports car behind her?"

"Negative."

The fiery little beauty is probably heading back to the club. Layla knew someone followed her. "Her boss is driving a silver Porsche. Let's head to the club and check it out," I tell Trent, and he makes his way from the secluded park setting onto the road that leads to the congested underbelly of Chicago. I

scan the streets for either the silver car or her bright blue Camaro, but they're nowhere in sight and probably much farther ahead.

"We're nearing the bar. You want me to pull up in this ride, or you wanna walk in?"

"Pull up close enough to get a look at the parking lot. I don't want to waste time if she isn't here," I tell Trent.

"Roger that," he says, pulling into the side street that leads to the place Bryanna and Layla work at, a secluded and seedy little strip club. A neon sign marks the ramshackle old building. The parking lot is a quarter full, but there's no sign of either car.

"Swing around back, and let's take a look. If they make us, we'll deal with it," I say, because there's a genuine possibility that Layla could be in danger, and the fact that our security team has put her in this position is not at all lost on me.

The lot in the back of the bar is empty. No sign of Layla's car anywhere. Trent's careful not to slow, making it look like we took a wrong turn and are flipping around.

"She shares an apartment with Bryanna. Let's head there," I say, glancing at my watch as we hit lunch-hour traffic that slows us to a crawl. I can feel the minutes ticking away. The sight of Layla swallowing with fear as she saw that car has not left my mind since we parted, and every second of delay only intensifies the need to reach her before her boss does.

As we finally near the turnoff that will lead us to Layla and Bryanna's apartment, her boss's sleek silver Porsche pulls onto the road. My jaw tightens.

"There he is!" Trent growls.

The Porsche passes us, going the opposite direction, heading toward the club.

Trent pulls up near Layla's apartment building to have a good view of the parking lot. "What the fuck? Her car's not here."

I glance around, and he's not wrong. There's not one damn car in the lot. "Where the hell did she go?" I ask, sending a message to Murph to see if he can pull up the city cams and scout the area for a bright blue and white striped Camaro. The six-unit building in front of us has seen better days. "Stay here and keep the car ready. I'm gonna take a look around."

I check my weapons and then slowly climb the stairs to her apartment. The steps look and feel as though they may collapse under my weight at any

moment. I knock at the door, listening for a response, but everything's quiet, way too quiet. I turn the knob, and it's not locked. I ease the door open slowly. "Layla, anyone home?" I say, pushing it open farther so that I can get a good look into the room.

"Son of a bitch!" I yell, hitting the contact for Trent.

Chapter 2

Layla

I get into my car and hit the gas, watching the rearview mirror intermittently in hopes that I can make it to the highway before R.J. spots me. The maniacal asshole who seems to have eyes in the back of his head must have followed me to the park after I left his place. He didn't seem the slightest bit off this morning, not one fucking word that would make me think he didn't trust me, and I was so careful. I brake hard for the stoplight and hit the steering wheel in frustration. Damn it!

There's no way I can go back to my apartment now, at least not until his temper dies. I've only seen the rotten side of his anger once, and it's something I'll never forget, nor bring to any of the ladies at the club. They all know I have tonight off, so I just need to lay low for a bit, go back for the big show R.J. has set up at the club tomorrow, shake my ass for a couple of hours and bring in a ton of money. When the patrons open up their wallets and toss those dark green bills all over the bar's dirty floor, all will be forgiven.

The light turns green. I step on the gas, checking the rearview. Calm the fuck down and breathe. That's what you need to do, Mami. This asshole knows nothing. All he has on you is a meeting with Dereck. He doesn't know why or what you told him, and Dereck will stand by the story I gave him. I don't know why, but I trust him. Maybe it's his deep, steely gray eyes or the way he talks about respect, or merely the fact that he's trying to help a girl in trouble, but I don't think he's going to toss me under the bus to these fuckers any time soon.

I make my way to the congested highway, trying to lose myself in traffic. I finally reach an exit that will allow me to double back and head toward the residential side streets and then to my bank. Traffic crawls at a snail's pace,

and every minute that passes causes me to grow more anxious as I make my way back to the side of the city I just left.

Once at the bank, I observe the surroundings, careful to ensure no one has followed me before heading inside and directly to one of the open teller windows. I take one of the withdrawal slips from the stack sitting in front of the clerk and fill it out before handing it to her. She reviews it, processes my transaction in the computer, and then counts out the cash. "I also need to check my safe deposit box."

Velma smiles and gestures to the door across the bank. "Certainly, my dear. I'll buzz you through, and someone will greet you just beyond the door and take you back," she says, just like she always does.

"Thank you," I call back, heading across the sparkling white tiled floor. The door buzzes just as I reach it and slip through. A guard stands on the other side, just like usual. I nod, and he reciprocates but doesn't say a word. He only extends a brief acknowledgment before leading me to another door. The burly man takes out his ring of keys, unlocks the door, and gives me access to the area beyond.

"I'll only be a minute." The door closes behind me, leaving me alone in the secured and confidential area. I walk quickly to my box, this time gathering some of the contents while leaving others in their place.

The late lunch traffic starts to ease when I head back to the highway, but it still takes an entire half an hour of the open road without seeing a silver sports car before I begin to calm down. It takes me another ten minutes to get to a Park and Ride. R.J. has cronies all over the city and the surrounding area. Even on this side of town, someone may spot this car. It's not something people see often or forget once they have, and the last thing I need is for someone to recognize it and let R.J. know where I am right now.

I take a ticket, park my car, and then grab my purse and the spare bag from the trunk before joining the group of passengers loading onto a small bus headed for the airport.

I slide into an empty aisle seat and pull out my phone to check the surrounding accommodations. The airport has an upscale hotel on the property, and it's as good a place as any to lay low for the rest of the day and night. A filling meal, shower, and a soft bed don't sound like a bad way to spend the evening. The airport isn't far away, but these park and ride businesses are popular because no one wants to pay airport fees to park, and as a result, the traffic is backed up for miles.

When we pull up to the airport, I give the older driver a twenty, and his eyes light up in appreciation for the dollar a minute tip. “Thank you,” he says.

I give him a bright smile and head down the stairs and onto the sidewalk in front of the airport entrance. A cab is parked on the corner, waiting for a fare, and I jump into the back seat.

“I’m just going to the hotel entrance on the other side of the complex but too lazy to walk around today,” I say, earning me a nod from the driver.

“Si we’ll get there in record time, Mami,” the cabby says, but the airport traffic makes the drive as long as the bus ride, even though it’s just around the block. I dig around in my bag and pull out the card I save for emergencies. I swipe it through the credit machine on the back of the passenger seat and punch in a nice tip when we arrive.

The young receptionist is friendly, fills me in on the area hotspots, and the easiest way to get to my room. I make my way to the bank of elevators not far away and then to my room, putting to memory its location and that of the exit stairways. I unlock the door and glance around the room slowly, getting acclimated, still a little on edge from the events of the afternoon. The upgrade to the more superior room was a good splurge. The place is furnished with a desk, mini kitchen, sprawling sofa with a coffee table next to a window, and a nice view of the city.

I should let Bryanna know that I won’t be home tonight and give her a heads-up on what I can. One of the few luxuries of being the boss’s girl is that I don’t have to rely on a flip phone like they give all the other girls. I can carry my own, but after today’s little escapade, that may have all changed. I don’t dare say too much if they’re watching her phone, and I have complete faith that Damian and Dereck are working to keep her safe.

I weigh the risk of sending her a message, and maybe she will be okay regardless of what they find on her phone. Bryanna may have pissed R.J.’s goons off, but no one is going to touch one hair on her lovely head because she’s protected. She’s a V card baby and promised to the high roller who will pay the most. No one, not even the boss’s right-hand men, can touch merchandise like that in any way, especially when delivery has already been scheduled. That much I know, but I can’t risk getting her involved in my crap. All of this degrading shit will stop one day because all of these fuckers will get caught and pay for what they’ve done to so many women all over the world.

There’s nothing to do but lay low now, give R.J. some time to cool off

and see what happens. I flip through the premier channels on the flat screen and decide to unwind with a comedy. I've just curled up and gotten comfy on the couch when my cell phone beeps with a new alert. I glance down and read the text from R.J. without actually opening the message, hoping he won't know if I've read it or not.

Message: Where are you, my little slut?

I take a deep breath. R.J.'s still clearly worked up. I'll give him my cover story for meeting with Dereck later; for now, better just to let him thoroughly cool off, enjoy my movie, grab a shower, maybe get a bite to eat and then read a book and relax until showtime at the club tomorrow.

* * *

The movie ends, and I head to the shower to wash away the day and rejuvenate a little. The tantalizing smell of the eucalyptus and mint body wash from the hotel envelopes me with its scent. It's refreshing and relaxing, a luxury I haven't had in a very long time. I let it soak into my senses as the water rains over me. The mist is warm and sensuous, and my mind drifts to the tall, dark security guard from the park. I say his name, Dereck, enjoying the way it rolls off my tongue.

It's been so long since anyone has flipped my girlie switch. When you're surrounded by men who hit on you repeatedly, telling you what to do sexually, day in and day out, you eventually become immune. But there's no way any red-blooded woman could ignore the sexual prowess emanating from Dereck. Damn, that man was fine! He may have been fully dressed, but there isn't a piece of clothing on the market that could disguise the lean strength of those corded muscles when he moved, and at over six feet, that's a hell of a lot of ripped.

The thought of him standing over me, talking to me like he did, causes all of my senses to come alive. The soft pelts of water stimulate my heating skin, and even hours later, his deep voice keeps playing over and over in my mind, sending a pulsing need straight to my center. *"I'd have you wiggle out of those tight skinned jeans, slip off your panties, and lay across my knee to teach you some respect."*

The image of Dereck rubbing my bare ass before he brings the strength of his flat hand down over my exposed cheeks sends my girlie switch into

overdrive. My fingers slide down my taut belly, through the suds, and toward my center. I'd lay myself over those fine thighs of his any time Dereck wanted to discipline me. It's been so long since I indulged, and my finger finds its way, gliding over my swollen clit in response to my increasing need. One small stroke, then a circle, and then another, but then the blare of my cell phone ringing intrudes on one of the most sensual moments I've had in the last two years.

Jesus! Bryanna has the worst timing. I scramble out of the shower knowing this may be the only chance she gets to call, so I grab a towel and answer the phone.

"Bryanna?"

"No, it's Dereck. I'm at your door. Let me in."

I pull the phone away from my ear and glance down at the number. It's not Bryanna. It's unlisted, but it can't be Dereck. Not here. What the hell?

"It's lonely out here, Princess. Let me in."

Chapter 3

Dereck

I push the door to Layla's rundown apartment open wider and take in the damage. The living room is sparse and an absolute disaster. It's furnished with a couple of barstools, an old-style box television, and a faded plaid couch. The items have all been destroyed and lay in various states of disarray all over the room. The cushions now lay in shambles with multiple slits in the upholstery that a heavy hand on a sharp as fuck knife has created.

An array of women's clothing has been torn from hangers, ripped to shreds, and lay strewn from one end of the room to the other. The clothes cover the floor, left wherever they landed, along with a scattering of pink, red, and silver high heels. I look past the living area and through the bathroom door gap. I can't see much, so I make my way closer, easing the door open further, slowly and cautiously. My jaw tightens at the thought of the raving madman who did this in an all-consuming rage, destroying Layla and Bryanna's property. My bets on the boss, but it's also possible he had company, and they still may be around.

My jaw locks tight when I see the word SLUT painted on the mirror with the lipstick now laying in the sink beneath it. The son of a bitch is jealous. He must not have put together that I was looking for information about the girls he's running through his club. Her boss thinks she's stepping out on him, which is good for our case, but seeing firsthand just what a maniacal son of a bitch he can be, not good for Layla.

The floor is covered with ladies' makeup tubes and cases of every kind imaginable. I make my way to the other side of the small apartment, open the closed door, and inhale deeply. No room in this tiny apartment has been left untouched. The bedding is in tattered shambles on the floor, and the word

PUTA has been carved into the mattress. My heart hammers like a freight train because I don't know where Layla is.

Trent texts me to let me know Matt just arrived and is on his way up and that he'll keep a watch out. We need to get someone to get this mess cleaned up because this is the last thing I want either her or Bryanna to see if they haven't already, but right now, my first concern is finding Layla.

I glance up from the destruction just as Matt walks into the apartment. "Damn, what the hell?" he says, taking in the destruction.

"Layla's not here, but her boss just left. I'm pretty sure he's to blame for the destruction. I don't think he suspects anything other than her stepping out, but you never can tell. Let's get the cleanup team to go through the apartment top to bottom. If anything here can prove he did it, I'm going to nail his ass to the wall. In the meantime, Murph is monitoring all the city cams for Layla. We've looked everywhere, but we need the extra eyes. I need to know where she is, Matt."

His eyebrows raise, but he doesn't question my call to bring intel into the mix.

"She wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for us. That asshole boss of hers followed her to the park. I'm not sure how he knew she was meeting someone, but we need to find out. Damian sent me Layla's picture and some highlights after you asked me to meet with her, but do you guys have an intel report or at least something that would give me a little more information about her?"

He shakes his head. "Damian sent a request through to Murph, but we haven't gotten anything back yet. Sorry you got dragged into this mess, but you know how important it is to the big boss, and Damian was up all night watching the girls' apartment. We needed the extra pair of hands," Matt says.

"You don't have to explain that to me. I'd do anything to help Brian Carrington. He's more than earned my respect after the way he and Chase financially backed and allowed us free rein to put together our security team. We'll get it figured out, but right now I need to find Layla. She knows more than she's told me, and we're responsible for the situation she's in," I say, heading out of the apartment and down the rickety steps to the awaiting car with Matt right on my heels.

"Roger that. I'll fill you in on the progress the guys are making into the Bryanna case a little later," Matt says, as I jump into the passenger seat of the running black sedan.

Trent rolls down the driver's side window and extends his hand in greeting. "Good to see you again, Trent. Glad to hear you and Liam are Stateside for a while. We could sure use the help."

"Likewise. I just got back and heard Dereck needed someone to ride shotgun. I'm happy to be back and busy. Liam told me he'd run backup in case we need help too. It sounds like the regular crew has their hands full right now."

"We're glad you're both back, especially right now. I have to get back, but the cleanup crew is on the way. I'll be on the wires, so call if you need anything," Matt says, heading back to his car.

Trent pulls out of the parking lot. "Where to?"

"Back to the club. Maybe we just missed her." I pull up the information Damian sent over and skim it for something I might have missed. Layla Contreras, a dancer at an out of the way bar who's supposed to have information about Damian's assignment, Bryanna Foster.

"I hope they've got enough men on the job to find Bryanna. It's not every day one of the two men we owe for getting our business started needs help to find someone. This assignment is personal to every one on the security team. No one messes with the big bosses or their families. Word has it that Brian Carrington plans to marry Jenny Torzial, and Bryanna is her niece," Trent says.

"It's true, and I think the entire team feels the same way. Brian will do whatever it takes to get her back for Jenny. Layla seems to be the only friend Bryanna has, at least since she went missing. I was hoping we could give Brian something more after meeting with Layla, but I'm still hopeful she'll tell me more once we find her."

I admire the picture attached to the note, focusing on the dark-haired beauty staring back at me from my cell screen. "Where are you, Layla Contreras?"

My phone rings, and I answer. "Tell me what you found, Murph?"

"We just caught Layla's Camaro on cam going through the toll. Looks like she's heading to the airport, my friend."

I can't say that I blame her if she knows the fucker's temper. "Keep an eye on her. We're on our way, but it'll be awhile."

"Roger that. Looks like she's pulling off the exit for the Park and Ride."

"Can you get a history on her for me any faster? I'm still running on little or nothing here."

“I’ve got it in the queue, but we’re running interference for Matt and Damian right now too, and those in-depth reports take time to prepare. What I can do, though, is cross-reference her name with the airport listing and see where our mystery lady is going.”

“Thanks, Murph.” I disconnect as we make our way across the city.

We’re just nearing the Park and Ride when Murph calls back. “Doesn’t look like a Layla Contreras is registered for any outgoing flights in the next day or two. A little bit of good news, before the bad. Layla texted Bryanna with her cell, so we have her phone number, and she just used her credit card for a cab, so we should be able to track her card from now on.”

“And the bad?”

“She just got out of a taxi, entered the hotel you guys use at the airport, and her boss’s sporty little Porsche just went through the toll about ten minutes ago, heading the same way. She may be meeting him at the hotel, or perhaps he has a tap on the lovely Miss Contreras.”

“Thanks for the heads-up. I’m not far from the hotel. Do you think I’m about twenty minutes ahead of the guy, Murph?”

“Yep, maybe a little bit more. There’s a backup on the other side of the toll that Layla’s boss will need to get through.”

“Can you get me the room number for the mystery lady before I arrive?”

“I’ll text it to you shortly.”

I smile because Murph and the team have a wealth of ways to glean information like this. “I’d lay bets that we have that information in less than fifteen minutes,” I tell Trent.

“You work with him a lot?” Trent asks.

“Yeah, the entire team is rock solid, but that guy is online twenty-four seven. I’ll introduce you when we get a chance,” I say before the overhead comes on with Murph’s voice in record time.

“She’s all checked in. Room 923.”

I can’t help but grin. “Do I want to know which lovely lady of yours you sweet-talked into giving you that confidential information, Murph?”

“You’d be wrong, my friend. It’s a skill, the power of knowing how to navigate systems without ever being caught.”

“Uh-huh. Your secrets are safe with me. Thanks for the help.” I disconnect before Murph can retort. I send a message to make sure one of the penthouses on the property is available tonight and that the other team members aren’t using the space. It’s free, which is good because we’re going

to need to move quickly to get Layla out of that room before the raving lunatic of a boyfriend shows up at her door.

Trent pulls up at the front entrance to the hotel. "I'll text you once I know more. Glad to have you back," I say before getting out of the car and heading straight through the lobby and up the elevator to the ninth floor. I enter the lovely Layla Contreras' number into my cell as I make my way through the hallway to her room and wait for her to pick up.

"Bryanna?"

"No, it's Dereck. I'm at your door. Let me in."

Layla's quiet, except for soft, rhythmic breathing on the other end of the line, causing my body to thrum with desire for the dark-haired beauty.

"It's lonely out here, Princess. Let me in."

Chapter 4

Layla

Dereck is at my freakin door. “Give me a sec,” I say, disconnecting, quickly drying off, and scrambling for some clothes that I can get over damp skin. I rummage through my overnight bag, pull out a pair of black yoga pants, throw on a clean white tank, and towel dry my hair as I head to the door and open it.

His steely gray eyes capture my gaze with his own before slowly wandering lower.

My cheeks heat, feeling my nipples pebble through the thin white material of my shirt. His eyes return to mine. “Who else has your phone number, Layla?”

I scowl. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Layla, this is important, and we don’t have a lot of time. When I ask you a question, I generally prefer a respectful response; not more of your attitude, especially after the day I’ve had.”

I realize my mouth is agape and close it slowly. “Only a few people. Why?”

He contemplates my response but doesn’t look convinced. “Specifically, who? And you don’t get to answer a question with another, princess.”

“And you don’t get to stalk my ass and then walk right into my hotel room uninvited and start ordering me around!”

“Who has your number, princess? Your boss?” he coaxes.

This man is as annoying as he is fine! “He’s one, and the other is Bryanna. I only gave it to her for an emergency. No one else calls me. The boss is a jealous puta. What can I say?”

“Grab your belongings. You’re moving in with me for the night.”

“Whoa! Pump your brakes, Casanova. I think you may have gotten the wrong impression about me. I may shake my ass for a living, but I’m not about to land under you tonight for a few lousy bucks. You throw around all that shit about respect, and then you come into my hotel room, don’t even ask, just order me to your room. That’s not how this goes down. See, at least the johns at the club have the decency to ask, and…”

“Stop talking. I’ll explain everything later. Gather your belongings, Layla. No more arguments. We need to go now before your boss finds you.”

“Are you fucking serious right now?”

His eyes turn to slits, and my heartbeat picks up. He’s dead ass serious. Damn that man! “Why didn’t you just say that!” I scurry for my purse, push the newly discarded clothes into the overnight bag, and slip into my heels. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Dereck looks up and down the hall, grabs my hand, and tugs me through the door. “Come on. We’re upstairs,” he says, taking my bag and tossing the strap over his shoulder.

He guides me up a flight of stairs and then to an elevator at the other end of the hall before punching in a code. The overhead display changes from numeric, and two words appear when the car stops—private VIP.

The doors open. Dereck checks the foyer, glancing side to side, and then gestures me out, keeping the strength of his hand on the small of my back as he guides me to the only door on the top floor of this hotel. “The security team owners keep a few penthouses here. We’re often in and out of the airport, and this makes life a little easier when we need a place to stay,” Dereck says.

The living space is larger than the room we left and more like a large condo than a hotel. The full kitchen has a green marble counter, stainless appliances, a large sofa and love seat, and a big-screen television mounted on the wall.

“I’ll set this bag in your bedroom. The suite has two, so you can have the one with the whirlpool in case you want to take a swim.”

“Thank you.” I slip out of my shoes, running my feet through the luxurious carpet. There’s a knock on the door, and my pulse begins to race. I’ve seen R.J.’s temper firsthand and also know precisely the weapon he’s packing. “He can’t find me here with you,” I say to Dereck as he returns.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Layla. He won’t have a clue where to look after he gets to the hotel and finds you checked in, but then checked out

a half hour later.”

I glance up at him and try to contain my grin. “R.J. will be in an absolute temper, but the look on his face when he learns I’ve disappeared right under his nose will be priceless. I really appreciate all of your help, but are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“I took the liberty of ordering dinner. I didn’t see room service come through on your credit card.”

“How did you track my credit card? Do you even know the meaning of the word privacy? Tell me!” I demand, giving him what I hope looks like a killer glare.

“Trade secrets. Hold that thought, princess,” Dereck says with a grin before opening the door for a woman delivering our food. “Thank you; I’ll take it from here,” he says, handing her a wad of bills before wheeling the cart laden with food and a bottle of wine that’s nestled in an ice-filled silver bucket into the room.

Dereck gestures me to the table situated by the window. “Have a seat, Layla. We should talk, but I find it much more enjoyable to do it over a meal than standing in the hallway.”

“As long as you don’t plan on acting like a caveman or try flipping me over your knee,” I say, taking the glass of wine Dereck has poured.

He tsks, and his mouth turns up in a smile. “Did I lead you to believe that was off the

table? Let me assure you. It’s not.”

My mouth opens, taking an effort to close it. “That’s not going to happen, papi!”

“Time will tell, princess,” he says, his deep steely gray eyes dancing with amusement.

I start to say something, but he quiets me with a hand in the air and a smile that sends my pulse racing. Damn that man! “A truce, at least until dinner is over, alright?”

“Fine!”

He rubs the short dark hairs of his goatee. “Are you fond of that word?”

“I don’t know,” I say cautiously, unable to tame the excitement his words and my curiosity bring. “Is that a trick question?”

“Hardly, but the use of it further would land you over the top of my thighs without any warning at all, whether you belong to me or not.”

“Are you always this arrogant? Tell me? Do you think I’m a possession?”

One to be bought and owned?" I ask, even as I clench my thighs.

Dereck takes a sip of his wine while watching me. "Not bought; owned perhaps. The reference is one meaning a trusting relationship between a dominant and his submissive. There was no arrogance or offense intended."

"Apology accepted. It's just not how I roll," I tell Dereck, taking another sip of my drink.

"That's disappointing, and for the record, you're wrong about that," Dereck says, keeping my eyes captured with the intensity of his gaze.

He's not looking for a response and continues talking like he hasn't just said something that I've been pushing away almost my entire life or questioning again ever since I met this gorgeous man and heard his commanding voice. "I hope you like salmon. The chef was raving about it the last time we stayed," Dereck tells me, lifting the dome covering my plate before placing it in front of me.

If he's going to change subjects, far be it from me to start a conversation about my sexual inclinations. "It's one of my favorites. I saw it listed on the menu with the jalapeno spiced coleslaw and would have ordered the same thing." I take a bite, murmuring my appreciation for the delicious combination. "Perfect in every way."

"I'm glad you like it," Dereck says, watching me with those steely grays before taking a bite of his own.

He's clearly not going to resurface the conversation, although now I'm dying for him to do just that. Fine, we'll play his silly games, but he still hasn't even told me how he found me, and I'm dying to know. I put my fork down with an unintended clatter. "Okay, papi. You need to come clean because this suspense is killing me. How did you find me or even know R.J. found the hotel for that matter?"

His lip quirks upward. "I was serious. Credit card."

"I only used it once I was at the airport complex. There wasn't enough time for you to get here. Not near enough time. You followed me?"

His cell phone beeps, and Dereck's lips tighten as he types a reply, ignoring my question. "Your boyfriend thoroughly trashed your apartment, and now he's making quite a scene at the front desk. The man is a raving lunatic. I'm having security escort him out."

Dereck clearly has connections at this place. "I didn't realize he followed me to the park, but I recognized his car when we were talking. He was parked across the other side by the far entrance, just watching us. He's pretty violent

when he's pissed off, so I planned to stay out of his way tonight. I'm sorry for all the drama."

"Rest easy. It comes with the territory. I work as a bodyguard, and there's seldom less drama in my days. I'll take care of things."

I frown at the soft-spoken brute. "I'm able to handle this. How did you become my babysitter?"

"Just lucky, I guess," Dereck says, watching me with those steely grays, still circling that damn glass rim with his finger and causing my thighs to clench at the thought of him rubbing something else like that. Damn, this man!

Dereck observes me but takes a sip of his drink. "You don't seem to think much of the person you date."

"Well, we both know he's not a boyfriend in the true sense of the word, but he's the boss. He pays the bills, and what he says goes. See, that's how a girl like me rolls, papi."

He sets his glass down. "Unfortunate and not true."

Now he's scaring me because if he knows too much, it would be bad, incredibly awful for both of us. Dereck doesn't know these people, really know them as I do. These people will cut your tongue out and send it back to your mama with a smile pasted on their faces while they enjoy a meal, and I don't intend to drag anyone into this shitshow. "Not true? What, how I roll? I'm pretty sure it is."

"It's not how you picture yourself because you're a powerful and intelligent woman, but you also happen to have strong submissive desires. It's not uncommon, Layla."

The man doesn't seem fazed that we're sitting over a table talking about my carnal inclinations while my heartbeat has increased, and my center feels like it's on fire. Damn this man and all that sexual energy he throws, and damn my treacherous body for letting him affect me the way he does. "I'm the least submissive woman in the world. You're wrong, and you've misread the signals, papi." I take the last sip of my wine.

Dereck reaches for the bottle of wine, anticipating my need for another drink. "Would you like another glass, Layla?"

"Yes, please. Beaujolais is one of my favorites, and it compliments the salmon nicely. The berry flavors burst, and the offset of the tannins is superb," I say, taking another bite of the moist fish as he freshens my glass.

Dereck rubs the scruff of his chin and watches me, yet he says nothing.

“What? A girl learns these things sometimes, and”—I shrug—“some of the men are well-versed in wines, cigars, and the like,” I say, trying to play it off while internally kicking my ass for that little slip. Damn, this man has gotten under my skin so bad that I can’t even think straight. I need to finish this glass of wine, and then that’s it. My tongue is entirely too loose around this incredibly handsome specimen of a man and a little bit of drink.

“I don’t think I’ve misread the signals, Layla. You see, a man who’s inclined to look for the clues can always find them in a submissive.”

“Look, I may like my men a little on the take-charge side, but they seldom are in my line of business. That’s probably all you’re sensing. They usually want to get a little show, get things done a certain way, you know, pay by the hour and have me take charge, not the other way around.”

“Well, if you insist on putting it out there, how much do you charge for an entire night, princess?”

Chapter 5

Dereck

A myriad of emotions pass over Layla's face as she tries to decide how to answer my question. She'll either hang on to her story, make up another one that helps corroborate what she's said, or tell me the truth, which all should make for an exceptionally interesting exchange.

Layla's astute and has a little bit of an honest streak which I find alluring, but that doesn't surprise me because everything about this woman makes my heart race and leaves my body thrumming with excitement. She is a mystery, so exquisitely beautiful and fiery at the same time, all a unique cover for her absolute submissiveness. I find myself intensely intrigued by everything about this woman who sits across from me, calling to every dominant neuron in my body.

Layla looks up at me, her deep brown eyes searching for an answer to some strange question she's contemplating. "I don't usually mix business with pleasure."

I rub the short hairs on my chin, stroking them with thought. The dark-haired beauty goes for option two but gives it a little twist, thinking it will put me off while still lending credence to her story. She is creative, and I find her adversity to straight-up lying to me intriguing, which only stokes my need to get to the truth.

"That may be true, but circumventing a lie is still a lie, Layla. In my world, that would get you a trip over my knee, princess, especially since you're putting yourself at risk by doing so. If you were mine, it simply wouldn't be tolerated. Your safety would be the highest priority."

Layla's natural dark lashes envelop her eyes, and she lowers them further, trying to hide her emotions from me. I would bet anything Layla doesn't even

realize what she's doing. Her soft submissive side has taken over. She's quiet, no longer fighting her instincts, letting her body and feelings lead the way. I find watching her internal battle with her feminine softness more arousing than anything I've seen or felt in a very long time, causing me to shift in my seat and allow room for my growing need.

Layla may not be mine, but her safety has become my priority, nonetheless. If I'm going to keep her protected, I'll need to learn more about this intriguing young woman, and right now, she's my only source until Murph frees up to run and compile my report. When Layla's had enough time to gather her composure, she looks up at me and now sits watching me with those deep brown eyes, sipping her wine and contemplating a reply.

I'm unaccustomed to waiting for a response. I should focus on getting to the truth, asking Layla questions pertinent to her safety, but there's something about this woman that causes me to skip my self-imposed rules. I'm more than interested right now in how Layla will answer my next question. "Are you going to tell me what you charge for a night of your services, princess?"

Layla's pulse and breathing patterns have both increased. The tip of her tongue runs gently across the seam of her red lips, making my cock throb against the inside of my pants, letting me know the magnetism drawing me to this alluring woman is as much at play for her as it is for me.

She sighs, and the sweet, sexy sound sends a streak of desire straight to my groin. "I think we both know I'm not going to charge you or anyone. There are some things that I'm not at liberty to share with you. They're not dishonest or illegal, but I can't share right now. I'm sorry about that, Dereck, because I do appreciate your willingness to help me today. A confrontation with R.J. would not have been good for anyone involved, especially me."

I hold her gaze steady with my own. I've received a well thought-out response and a calculated brush off to get me out of her affairs. "I told you earlier, if you need help, ask. It's okay to want someone to look after you, princess."

The hard-ass Layla portrays to the world may not need anyone to take care of her, but her soft, submissive side likes it very much, and there's no way for her to conceal this from someone who's watching for it as intently as me.

The wine is starting to take effect, and Layla's face lights up with a soft, sensuous smile, causing her bright white teeth to glimmer against the red tint of her lips. "I've never had anyone looking out for me. I would be lying if I

told you it wasn't nice, but timing is everything, and right now, things aren't exactly good for me," Layla says softly.

"You've never had someone who has your best interests at heart and has nothing to gain by doing it?"

She assesses me for a moment, grappling for a response, perhaps from her outward persona, but her softer side hasn't completely diminished. Layla's submissive desires lay right below the surface, bubbling and shining through her expressive brown eyes. She responds to my question almost shyly, looking at me with wide, honest brown eyes while tugging on the very core of my dominance.

"Never."

"Now you do." Letting harm come to this dark-haired beauty is not something I will allow, even if it wasn't part of the assignment because the attraction between the two of us is magnetic and intense; something I don't think either of us can deny.

Layla smiles, and then, as if rethinking her position, or remembering her hard-ass attitude, she sets her wine glass down with a thud. She may have just given me a small glimpse into her softer side, but now her features have turned pensive. "I know how to take care of myself, Dereck. I don't belong to you, so there's no responsibility on your part for my safety. I'll be okay. I've been taking risks my entire life, it seems, but thank you for the offer."

My phone beeps, and I mentally curse the intrusion. I glance at the message and decide that it will keep for a while, turning my attention back to the pensive young lady across from me. "You're welcome. So who do you belong to, princess? Who treasures you, protects you, and keeps your bed warm at night? R.J.? Is he the one, because a party of three is most definitely not my scene."

Layla contemplates my question, and a myriad of emotions pass over the depths of those deep brown eyes, and then she smiles. A broad smile that lights up her entire face like she's just toppled onto the best secret, or response, in the world. "I told you, papi. I don't belong to anyone. The truth is, it's been a long, long time since I was really with someone, but R.J. thinks I belong to him, and by his definition, I probably do."

If she thinks she's fooling me, she's not. That smile was because she found a way to circumvent a lie, but now she seems wary of whatever dilemma she finds herself in and gestures toward the phone. "Is that about R.J.?"

I demand honesty in any relationship, platonic or other, and that's what she'll get from me in return, regardless of consequence. "No, princess. I had the security team escort R.J. off the property, but his lackeys are still lurking around the perimeter. This message is just letting me know that part of an in-depth report I've requested into your background was just sent to my email."

If I didn't know she had something to hide before, I certainly do now. She tries to mask her fear, but it's too late. I've already seen the gold flecks flash in those lovely brown eyes, and the tightening of her jawline is a clear giveaway. I'm prepared for Layla to tell me to mind my own business or lament about the fact that she's quite capable of taking care of herself, but that's not what this passionate, dark-haired beauty is bringing.

Layla daintily dabs her lips with a napkin and lays it down. "Is the invasion of a person's privacy something you find acceptable in your— what did you call them, trusting relationships? It may be customary in your world, but in mine, it's just plain old-fashioned stalkerish, and I won't put up with it!"

I'm unable to control the upward tip of my lips as this fiery beauty lights into me about invading her privacy when all I'm trying to do is protect her. I start to say something, but she and her short-fused temper are far from done. I decide to sit back and enjoy the tirade until it plays itself out.

Layla holds up her hand as if to ward off my non-existent defense. "Stop, just stop talking. I am so mad at you right now. How can you think this is okay? Any part of this? Tell me that? Tell me now!"

I try hard not to laugh. "I'm trying to protect you, princess."

Layla glares at me, and her lips purse with annoyance. "I told you, I don't need or want your help. I can't go home since all of R.J.'s goon squad is lurking around waiting for me. I'm stuck in this condo with you." Layla huffs as if that's the absolute worst thing in the world.

I watch with unabashed amusement, and this does nothing to diminish her temper.

"I've had enough of this day! I'm going to take a bath, curl up with a good book, get a good night's sleep, and when I get up, hopefully, I won't see your smug-looking face."

"Well, that certainly doesn't sound half as fun as what I had in mind, but suit yourself, princess. There's always tomorrow." I take another sip of my red.

Her mouth opens wide, and she narrows her eyes at me. She starts to say

something, thinks better of it, and then spins on her bare toes.

“Good night, princess.”

A resounding bang and a click as she makes sure the door is entirely closed causes me to chuckle. I glance at my watch, gauging how long it will take before the fiery dark-haired beauty returns to find out what I know about all of her secrets.

Chapter 6

Layla

Although freshly showered, a hot bubble bath in this fantastic whirlpool tub sounds like heaven. I'm all about anything that will keep me in here and away from that arrogant damn man who's somehow managed to wiggle under my skin like an irritating little thorn you can't get rid of for anything. I select a playlist, turn on the water to the tub, and choose a scented bath gel from the ledge's assortment before emptying the contents into the now frothing water. I undress and sink deep into the bathwater until the water foams and swirls around my neck, and the bubbling relaxation starts to soak into my senses.

Dereck makes me so mad I could spit, and my girlie bits so needy that I could wilt right in front of him. He rattles all of my senses straight out the window. I need to cool myself down, shake it off, get to the club tomorrow, and put this day, Dereck, and everything that happened far behind me and focus.

I'll catch R.J. right before the big show. He won't be able to do anything to me until after that, not without losing a load of money from the regulars he's been stringing along all week with promises of a big pole show from yours truly tomorrow night. I'll pretend to come clean with him, tell him the thought of taking Dereck and his friend up on their offer of buying a private show had crossed my mind. I'll let him know I wasn't going to go through with it and time it so that as soon as I drop that little morsel, the MC will call me onto the dance stage.

He'll have the entire time I'm dancing to think about it. Once I get done, he'll probably want me to talk with Dereck and Damian about setting up even more of their high roller friends with the girls at the club. His wheels will be

spinning by then. The dollars he could bring in with a deal like that should turn his energy from me to the fact that he could capitalize on the situation. Then, hopefully, he'll decide hurting me isn't the wisest choice for anyone concerned. The asshole will probably even forget all about his jealous streak when he talks to his accountant, the one who hangs out in the back of the club, continually adding and subtracting to the books, acting like he runs the club and everyone in it.

The water starts to cool, and I bend almost in half, reaching the faucet to pour more hot water into the tub. My cell beeps with another message from R.J.

Message: You're safe until tomorrow. You don't mess with other men. Understand, my little whore?

Just his style to let me think I'm safe and then have his goons pick me up as soon as I walk out of this establishment, but thanks to Dereck, I know what I'd be walking into if I leave the hotel now.

The message confirms what I thought. R.J. is jealous, but he's still expecting me to dance tomorrow, which means things are still salvageable. I can go back to the club, get the information from the snake who has it, and hopefully help Bryanna, along with all the other girls at the same time. I should rethink my strategy, play nice with Dereck, and try to find out precisely what his friend knows about me. If he can dig up information, so can other people who might be looking, and that wouldn't be good for anyone, especially me. I shouldn't have let my temper or his ability to light my switch get the best of me, and I usually wouldn't, but damn this man throws me off my game.

I let the water continue to soothe my irritation, psyching myself up for another confrontation with the incredibly hunky man on the other side of the wall. Dereck has somehow figured out my sexual provocations, knows more than he should about my background, and I should really find out how and why.

I towel off, throw on a pair of my signature skin-tight jeans, and a low cut black tank. I grimace as I take a good look in the mirror. It's what I signed up for, and you have to play and dress the part in this business. I fluff my hair with the towel and finger through it, letting some of its natural wave take shape, then I brush my teeth and run a red-tinted gloss over my lips before heading out to find out what Dereck knows.

I walk into the living room, and Dereck is sitting at the table, which has

been cleared from dinner. He's working on a laptop but stops to glance up, his eyes lingering over my body, taking me in from head to toe, sending a tingle of desire straight down my spine. Men ogle me all day long, every day of my life now, and not one of them flips my switch. This man, however, sets me on fire with his gaze, and I find it extremely perplexing.

"Take a seat, Layla." It's not my imagination that Dereck's voice lowers an octave when giving me instruction, nor that my center wets every time he does.

I slide into the chair across from him and watch his long fingers grasp the water pitcher as he pours the clear liquid into the glass in front of me.

"Thank you," I say, swallowing as the heat of his steely gray eyes penetrates me from across the table, stirring the thrum of excitement that flows through my veins.

"I thought you were going to read and then go to bed after your bath," Dereck says, taking a drink of the water that is set beside his laptop.

"I was but thought an apology was probably in order. I didn't mean to be so touchy, but having a report run on me is a little bit stalkerish," I tell Dereck.

"Apology accepted. I work security, a girl's life is in danger, and you're the closest contact we have. It's how the system works. I'm happy to tell you what it says if you're curious. I have some questions anyway," Dereck says.

I can't argue with the logic or his honesty. "I'd like to know."

"Why don't we start with the easy stuff?" Dereck says before going through the finer points of his document. "Exotic dancer, twenty-eight-years-old, but no further information confirmed yet. Why the change of employment?"

I breathe a sigh of relief, knowing he has my cousin's info and not my own. Just a few years apart, but with the same name. "Money, papi. Doesn't everything come down to the almighty buck these days?"

"Perhaps. How long after you started working at the club did you begin dating the boss?"

I take a sip of my water, wishing it were stronger. "Do you have any more wine?" I ask.

Dereck penetrates me with the heat of his gaze from over the top of his laptop. "Two glasses will have to do you for the night, Layla, and you didn't answer my question."

"Last time I checked, I was old enough to drink as much as I wanted."

His eyes don't waver from mine. "Two-drink limit when you're with me, princess, and you still didn't answer my question. I'm not accustomed to asking more than once."

I look away, anything to avoid the penetrating gray eyes of the man who not only seems to see right through me but senses or knows more than he should, and that voice. Everything about this man sets my center on fire. "I think it's pretty personal. Why do you want to know?"

"I'm simply trying to protect you. Your boyfriend has a rap sheet longer than most of the criminals I've come across. He's been convicted of domestic violence, pimping, pandering, suspected of trafficking, drug running, and a slew of other things."

I've heard it all before, every time the local police come sniffing around trying to get information about him and me through some of the other girls. I'd only been labeled his girl for three days before they were looking for me. They all think if they get to his girl that I'll give them something they'll be able to use to collar the bastard and beat the feds out of a bust, but they're not getting anything from me, and neither is Dereck. "I already told you—I can take care of myself, papi."

"I know what you told me, but we both know R.J. isn't the ideal boyfriend and that you like it more than you want to admit when I try to take care of you. Stop stalling, princess. Tell me what I want to know."

I sigh because he's not going to let this go. "The same day, okay? R.J. gave me a showcase spot, the longest dance of the night, and the crowd liked me. He offered to take me home after the show and..." I shrug. "The rest you can probably guess."

Dereck takes a drink of his water, running his fingers over the short hairs of his chin, surveying me in silence while my heart pounds so hard it's difficult to believe he can't hear it from across the table.

"I can't say that I blame the man for going after what he wants, and you presumably didn't know the other stuff he was into at the time, so understandable. People with a record of violence like his are not going to change. Has he ever hurt you, Layla?"

I swallow hard because Dereck has managed to throw me off my game with his smooth charm. I'm supposed to be the one learning what he knows, trying to decipher it, and not the other way around. "I think twenty questions are over. If you're trying to get more information about R.J. to help Bryanna, I've given you everything. I wouldn't hold back information that could help

her. I hope you believe that.”

He closes his laptop and slides it to the side. “I don’t believe you’re holding back information intentionally, but there may be something you know from spending time with R.J. that may be able to help us.”

This man is entirely too intimidating and sexy for his or my good. The information he has from his security buddy seems harmless enough. I’ll have to deal with his ability to track me, but other than that I can at least breathe more comfortably for now.

“It’s going to be a long day tomorrow. I think I’ll use the time to catch up on some well-needed rest,” I say, getting up from my seat and purposely avoiding his gaze as I make it to the bedroom door.

“Layla? One last question. Do you know how Layla Contreras died?”

Chapter 7

Dereck

The sun's barely had a chance to rise. I lay in bed listening to Layla tiptoeing around in the room next to mine. I'm not one bit surprised she shut the door and went to bed last night without answering my question.

She treads lightly through the condo and out the front door. But not before I send a message to Trent and the team, letting them know Layla is on her way out of the hotel, asking them to follow her and give me hourly updates on her activity. We'll need to provide her with enough space to see what she's up to, but to keep a close enough distance to protect her from R.J. and his goons. Something tells me Layla knows more than she's letting on. I head to the shower, still contemplating this mystery lady. The warmth of the water pelts my skin and may slightly ease my tension until I get into the martial arts studio, but nothing is going to alleviate my cock's throbbing because the attraction to Layla is powerful and all-consuming. I've barely slept, instead dreaming about training this spirited dark-haired beauty in the art of accepting and giving pleasure.

My hand slides over my sudsy rod, once, twice, and then hard for the third time. The image of a nude Layla kneeling on the floor of my shower and looking up at me with those dark, sultry bedroom eyes ready to accept my gift causes my balls to tighten with a surging explosion before rope after rope of my hunger coats the wall of the shower as a substitute for Layla's lovely and parted red-lined lips.

I place my head against the cool stone, letting my breathing acclimate, and the warmth of the water pelt away the rest of my body's tension. I watch the remnants of my desire swirl past my feet, around and around before heading down the drain. Layla and her fiery personality have managed to put

more than a reel and spin in my routine. The power of my need may have somewhat dissipated with the release, but the intensity of my desire for this complex and mysterious woman is not lost on me for a moment.

Layla either doesn't fully realize her submissiveness or is pushing it aside and trying to refute her needs. It's not an uncommon trait, but I'm not usually drawn to a woman who isn't overly submissive and comfortable with their penchant. I tend to gravitate to the ones who come to the club and know exactly what proclivity they want for the evening. The beauties who are secure in their desires to please and receive pleasure in kind, those are my types. They know I will give them exactly what they need in the playroom and push them far enough to the edge without letting them fall. They're safe with me and able to explore their desires and boundaries under my authority, but have no expectations outside of that.

* * *

Trent picks me up outside the hotel just after lunch. "Did you sleep at all?" I ask, sliding into the front seat.

"A little bit before I sent the guys out this morning, but I could use a few z's after I drop you off," he says.

"Thanks for all the help last night. We could use some more at the club tonight. Both you and Liam if you're free."

"I'll get ahold of him, but if you don't hear from me, we'll both be there."

We pull up to the martial arts center an hour or so later after navigating bumper to bumper traffic, and Trent gestures toward the center. "You're this cool, calm, and collected sort, so quiet and respectful, yet one of the deadliest on our team. They say you can kill a man with one swift move and your bare hands," Trent says.

I smile at the partner who hasn't been on the team for as long as most. "The ability to defend my teammates or self, if the need should arise, allows the calm," I say.

Trent is a good man. He's highly experienced, and I've gotten to know him better than most on the team chatting online with him at night. His heart is in the right place. He appears quiet and thoughtful. "You still teaching the boy you were talking about a few weeks ago?" he asks.

"I am. Ian's young and ambitious, but he respects the culture and will do

well if someone puts time and effort into teaching him both the art and discipline integral to Judo.”

I glance down at my cell for the latest update on Layla. She went from the hotel back to her car at the Park and Ride, picked it up, and then went to a restaurant for breakfast and has been there ever since drinking coffee and working on a notebook device. “Looks like Layla’s on the move. Murphy said she’s pulling into the gym not too far from the club.”

“I’m not surprised she works out. The lady is exceptionally fit,” he says, finding a place to park for a few minutes.

I ignore his comment, focusing on something that might take my mind off the beautiful Ms. Contreras' hot, nubile body. “Do you mind staying on the lines for the next hour or so? I have a session with Ian, and then you can go catch up on your sleep. I parked my car in the back of the center. I’ll be able to stop at my apartment and pick up a few things for tonight when I finish. I’ll head to the club with Damian tonight and text you later with the time to meet up with us at the club.”

“Sounds good. I’ll keep an ear out for Layla with Murphy until you’ve finished giving Ian his lesson and then get some sleep. I’ll plan to see you tonight,” Trent says before I get out of the car and head into the martial arts center.

* * *

I bow to my Judo partner after the last round ends, and then we bend together, facing the instructor who has graciously taken my place for this session so I can get a little hands-on one-to-one time with Ian. “Domo arigato,” we both say in unison, using the Japanese term to say thank you and to show respect for the culture and knowledge bestowed upon us by the instructor during the spar.

“Thanks for the help, Dereck. I’m going to win that competition! I know it!” Ian says as the instructor who sat in for me walks away after the match. I hold back a smile, adjust my judogi, and tighten my belt.

Ian’s eyes track my movements, and his eyes dance with sixteen-year-old enthusiasm. “I’m going to reach tenth degree when I’m as old as you, and I’ll be wearing that red belt too! Just wait and see!”

I try to hide my smile at the youth’s exuberance. “You are progressing

nicely, Ian, but humility will serve you well in the next ten years.”

He bows his head slightly, a show of respect while contemplating what I’ve said.

“When you are as old as me, and reach tenth Judan, Ian, I expect invitations to your competitions,” I say to soften my admonishment.

He looks up and grins at me. “You’ve got yourself a deal!”

“Good, now keep practicing. I’ll see you next week.” I head to the locker room to shower off the session.

My cell beeps as I slide into the driver's seat of my car. Trent’s on his way home to rest, Murph’s planning to send me updates as they come in, and Layla’s still at the gym. That should ease my worry, but still, she continues to stay top of mind. The thought of the dark-haired beauty in a pair of leggings and strappy little sports bra causes my cock to throb. I imagine divesting her of them in the gym and bending her exquisite rear over one of the weight benches while I show her just how submissive she can be. I shake my head to ward off the image, but I already know it’s going to take more than that to clear her from my mind. The physical attraction to Layla is far too strong. The desire to explore the boundaries of the spirited beauty's soft and submissive side pulls on my dominance with a force that will be exceptionally hard to ignore. While I suspect she feels the same, there’s a lot she’s not telling me and that we still need to know if we are going to solve this case for Brian.

I pull up to The Prestian Towers near Lake Michigan, letting Marcus, who’s valeting tonight, know I’ll be heading back out a little while later and will send him a text when I need the car pulled around. “Take your time, Dereck! I could always take the Aston Martin for a little spin while you’re up in the penthouse getting ready,” he says, his eyes alight with amusement.

I give the young man who works at the tower full-time and goes to school at night a smile. “Don’t go too far, Marcus,” I say with a grin before he gives me a thumbs-up and drives off in my car, smiling from ear to ear. I head into the skysrise to get my things ready. If the chatter over the radio is any indication of what’s in store for the team tonight, it’s going to be all hands on deck.

My cell rings, and I catch Murph’s call on the first ring. “Layla finished at the gym. She’s been working out for hours, just walked out the door, and is getting into her car. Damn, does that woman clean up nice! I’d bet money she’s heading to the club looking like that, Dereck.”

I glance at my watch. It's still too early for anything to be going on at the club. I'd bet money Layla's not heading there until later in the evening. She won't want to show up until all the action starts unless, of course, she's meeting someone, which could always be the case. "Can you let me know where Layla goes and when she gets there? And I know you have a lot on your plate, like checking out how good Layla looks, but can you try to sneak in the rest of that report?"

"Sorry, Dereck." He doesn't sound nearly as chastised as he should. "It really has been crazy around here, but I'll try to get that report out as soon as I can. Hey, I have to go. Things are heating up on the Bryanna front, but we'll talk soon," Murph says before disconnecting.

I get a message an hour later letting me know Layla's stopped at the library, has her computer set up in front of her, but instead of working on it, she's reading a novel. Layla is smart, and she's probably just biding her time. She won't go home in order to avoid R.J., knowing he's already been there, but she hasn't seen the extent of the damage or the rage in which he did it. I've already had someone replace Layla's clothing, mattress, and furnishings and have men watching her apartment. I'm still glad she's opted not to go back home right now. If R.J. walks through her apartment door, he's going to meet the gruesome side of men who don't take kindly to violence or mistreatment of women. Layla doesn't need to be anywhere near if it happens.

It's far later, and just as I jump into the car with Damian and Evers, who are on their way to the club to deal with Bryanna, I get another message letting me know that Layla's heading in the direction of the bar too.

Damian's unusually quiet until we arrive. "Can you keep your eyes on Layla? Find out if she knows anything else? She's the best lead we have. I have an entire team helping me watch Bryanna."

"I can, but you know they probably have your ass on camera," I say.

"If they recognize and come after me, I'll know who my fucking target is then, right?"

"You're not wrong, my friend. You should have a backup when you go in. What if Evers runs point out front, then I'll watch Layla." I gesture to the grouchy driver who was once on the security team until he decided he liked driving better.

"Fine. You go in first, cover my entry, then find Layla," Damian says.

He didn't need to tell me to put my sights on the fiery dark-haired

princess because I've been looking forward to putting my eyes on her hot little body all day long. "Got it. Here, put this on," I say, tossing him one of my beanies before I get out of the car and head into the pulsing and crowd enthused club.

I spot Layla right away. Her long hair is flowing around her, and she's dressed in a short skirt, high heels, and a silky little tank. She's talking to an older waitress who's wearing a top which leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination when I walk up behind Layla. Layla senses me in her space, and her body responds so sweetly to my presence. I trail a finger down the pulse along her neck, feeling it begin to beat faster, listening as her inhalations become more rapid. Layla stands with her back to me, trying to play it off, pretending my presence isn't affecting her, but I know better. "You ran from me, princess. We didn't even get to finish our Q and A session. I would have at least fed you and given you a ride back to your car this morning if you had stayed."

She turns, grappling with her emotions, trying to recover her composure, and when she does, she's back to throwing shade. "Yeah? How nice, and what would you have paid a girl like me, after that was done? Tell me?"

"Probably more than you charge, princess." I can't help but goad her a little. A small bit of retribution for her absurd comment. Besides, she's entirely too alluring when she's all wound up.

Layla gives me a withering look, one I no doubt deserve, but she doesn't lay down that easily. "The services are endless for the right price and the right girl. Unfortunately, it's not me, papi. Look around the club. You can have your choice of a wealth of willing women. In the meantime, grab a drink and enjoy the show," Layla sasses, throwing me a wink before spinning on her stilted heels and quickly making her way to the back of the stage.

My dick has been problematic since she slinked out of that little sports car in those skin-tight jeans, and it pulses with desire as this sultry little spitfire prances away from me, full of secrets in her short skirt and sexy heels.

The MC announces Layla to the stage next. I wait with anticipation along with the rest of the bar as she walks out onto the raised platform and manages to take my breath away. The bright red G-string bottoms Layla wears are enough to keep any red-blooded man's interest. She strolls around the stage in time to the music, flirting with the crowd, throwing them smiles, and tossing her long, dark wavy hair for the audience. Layla sends a seductive little wink in my direction before spinning and lowering herself to the floor.

She teases us all, writhing on the floor before arching her delectable little body to give the rowdy crowd and me a very up front and personal view of her upended ass.

She doesn't let up, keeping us all enthralled with her seductive display, teasing us with little touches to her top, before rising from the floor and heading for the rod of steel in the middle of the stage. This crowd knows what's coming, and the excitement grows twofold while my anticipation and desire for the spirited beauty grows even more intense.

Layla keeps us waiting and sure as hell doesn't disappoint. She slowly spins around the pole, giving everyone in the room a good view of her feminine but rippled physique displayed in her tiny little outfit. She uses the strength of her arms, upper body, and abdomen to lift herself and her legs to propel her graceful form around that pole.

Bryanna, the one everyone's trying to protect, isn't far from the stage, watching as her friend dances for the crowd. A glance in Damian's direction assures me he has the situation with Bryanna well in control, leaving me to give my undivided attention to the fiery dark-haired beauty on the stage.

Layla's soaking in the music, completely lost in her performance, teasing the audience every time she slides up and down that pole. She teases, touching the little string on the side of her G-string panties, and then spins for the entire room. She keeps every hot-blooded male on the edge of their seat, waiting with eager anticipation for her to quit teasing and take something off.

Layla has the entire audience on edge, and this gives us all a little smile as she seductively tugs on the dainty string around her neck, letting the lacy material float to the floor. Her magnificent breasts spill out, bouncing beautifully under their slight weight, high, firm, and fucking perfect. Layla spins one more time, working the pole, slowly grinding up and down ever so indecently before flipping upside down. She holds herself upright with the strength of her arms and a dainty ankle wrapped seductively around the silver rod. She flips from the pole and lands perfectly, sending the crowd into a loud frenzy before taking a bow and prancing off the stage.

I spot R.J. across the room. His mouth pulls tight as he watches Layla, but he quickly turns his attention when he sees Bryanna across the room. I'm not worried because Damian's watching Bryanna. His eyes haven't left the wispy dark-haired woman with deep green eyes who he's been trying to bring home to safety, but she has secrets of her own, and until Damian learns what they are, it's not going to be as easy as just taking her home to mama. I focus on

Layla, who's watching R.J., tracking him as he walks across the room and disappears into a doorway marked as an employee-only entrance.

As soon as his attention shifts, Layla slips through the back of the stage and returns seconds later in a silky red robe that barely covers her ass. She walks down the stairs of the platform stage, adjusting her over-the-shoulder purse as she heads to the bar. She says something to one of the burly bouncers and then walks out the back exit swinging her luscious little ass for anyone who's watching.

I weave my way through the patrons and head out the front door, making my way quickly around the side of the bar to the back. I'm just in time to see her take a wad of bills from the driver of a car parked at the rear of the lot, walk around to the passenger side, and then slip into the front seat.

My jaw tightens. I would have bet anything Layla wasn't servicing on the side, that she was dancing for enjoyment, or perhaps needed the money; both of which are acceptable reasons, in my opinion. I should leave it alone. Layla's a big girl, free to do whatever she chooses with her body, but she's managed to become my responsibility to protect, and I decide she isn't selling herself in some seedy parking lot tonight. I'm halfway to the car when a woman cries out, drawing my attention to a large, burly man roughly pushing a woman wearing a robe similar to Layla's, but in pink, toward an RV at the back of the lot.

He manhandles the woman in the short pink robe up the stairs and pushes her through the door. She's not walking into that situation of her own free will, and nothing about that scenario is okay in my book. I yank open the driver's side of the car Layla's in, pull the john from his seat, and push him against the vehicle. "Layla can't play tonight, understand?"

He nods emphatically. "Yeah, man."

Layla abruptly opens the passenger side car door and bolts, racing full throttle toward the RV.

"Consider yourself lucky. Leave and don't come back," I tell the man, letting go of his collar before taking off after her. I reach the RV at the back of the lot moments behind Layla, but she's two steps ahead of me and has already yanked the door wide open before I can stop her.

"Get your slimy hands off her, Larry! You touch her again, puta, and I'm going to mail your pathetic dick back to your mama gift wrapped in a little box," Layla says, helping the young woman with a mascara stained face who is sitting on the bed.

The flimsy top underneath her robe is still on but in complete disarray, telling me everything she doesn't need to say. The young woman's eyes are spilling over with tears. Still, it's Layla who holds my attention because the long-ass knife she has pressed into the man's back has already drawn blood and is slowly trailing along his spine, leaving a slit in the material as she travels downward.

"It's okay, Kallie. He's not going to hurt you," Layla says gently to the young woman.

Larry starts to say something, but Layla cuts him off. "You think you're a big man, hurting the women? Making them do what you like, what they don't want? You hear me, and you hear me good. If you ever so much as come near one of my friends again, you will see me again, puta. When your pants are around your knees, and you least expect it, that will be the last time you see your pitiful little cock, comprendo?"

"I got it, loud and clear."

Larry may have just assured her that he would stop, but Layla and her wicked-looking knife aren't hearing him. In one quick move, she's sliced his shirt entirely down to his lower back. Layla grabs the back of his pants and yanks on them hard. He groans with the pain against his groin, but Layla doesn't relent. "Step out of your pants."

My interest is piqued, wondering how this will play out when she has his pants pulled up so tight he's almost on his toes. "I'm finished. I won't touch the girls," Larry whines, looking to her, then to me, and then back to her.

"Your word doesn't mean shit. Step out of your pants. Do it now," Layla says, finally releasing her grasp from his pants but not removing the knife from his skin.

The wide-eyed girl on the bed has dried her tears. She's watching Layla and the weapon she wields as the big, burly man begins unbuttoning his pants. I send a note to Trent, who's guarding the perimeter, to come and get the young woman and take her to safety because she's not walking back into that snake pit, not after this, at least until I know there won't be repercussions for her once she does.

Larry's down to his skivvies, and Layla has everything under control. Trent lets me know he's about three minutes away, as she briefly turns to me. "They're planning to sell Kallie locally, and it's set up for tonight. She needs to disappear fast. Since you're here, you might as well help."

I turn to Kallie. "A friend of mine is on his way. Trent will take good care

of you, okay, Kallie?”

Kallie’s eyes widen. She looks to Layla, who has already turned back to the man in front of her. She senses the young woman’s apprehension and tries to alleviate it. “Dereck is a good man, and his friend will do as he asks. I’ll find you when I can,” Layla says, just as someone raps on the door. She turns the asshole around so she can keep her knife trained on him while opening the door.

Trent is standing on the steps outside. I gesture to Kallie to come to me, reaching out a hand to assist her as she gingerly makes her way to the edge of the bed and then attempts to step onto the floor of the trailer.

The minute she does, her ankle rolls, and she crumples into the arms I extend. “Whoa, what’s the matter?” I ask, looking down into the still fearful eyes of the young woman who landed in my arms.

Kallie looks up at me, blinking, trying to keep the connection open, but it’s far too late. The young woman’s eyes are widened from fear, and by the looks of her dilated pupils, her condition is much worse than that. I’d recognize that look anywhere.

Chapter 8

Layla

“Come on in, Trent.” His friend steps into the RV, surveys the situation, and takes Kallie from Dereck’s arms, cradling her against his body.

“Kallie’s been drugged,” I tell Dereck. “He does that to all the girls. I don’t think the puta can handle anyone who puts up a fight. Larry doesn’t use a high dose. He likes them to come to and fight a little at the end. This one’s a sick bastard, aren’t you?” I challenge, pushing the knife against Larry’s skin just a little bit harder.

“What’s your name?” Trent asks, looking at the blonde with bright blue eyes tucked securely in his arms as he turns and walks down the stairs.

I revert my attention to her assailant. Larry probably wonders how I know so much about him and that he would make a move tonight. He most likely thinks R.J.’s been talking, telling me things he shouldn’t, but he doesn’t say a word, just watches me warily. “Did I say stop? Keep going? Slide the pants off and step out of them,” I order.

Larry is undoubtedly regretting his decision to test out the goods before the sale tonight, evidenced by the trembling of his hands, which now hang uselessly down the side of his undressed body. Regrettably, Dereck stumbled into a scene he shouldn’t be a part of, but we’ll need to deal with that later because right now, I need information, and this man is going to give it to me.

I glance up into those steely gray eyes. Dereck’s observing me and intermittently glancing out the crack of the door, just taking it all in. I gesture the man closer to the bed and keep a close eye peeled. The minute he gets on the bed, he’ll use the position and leverage to strike, and that’s precisely what he does.

His foot comes out with the full force of his weight behind it, and when

he strikes, I avert a kick that has enough strength to knock me backward and onto my ass otherwise. “Bad move, puta!” I strike out, landing my spiky heeled foot right into the center of his groin because he’s left himself completely exposed and deserving of that excruciating maneuver.

“Bitch!” he yells, but he’s insulted and hurt enough people tonight. I shut him down with a forced palm to the mouth that busts his lip wide open. I grab him by the hair and place my knife against his throat. “You set up all the big meetings. There’s a masquerade party, and Lacey’s on the auctioning block. I want an address, and you’re going to tell me, or you’re going to lose one body part at a time until you do!”

“Fuck you!”

The force of my strength brings his head down into the bony part of my knee, breaking his nose with a clean snap to the bone. He yells out in pain but leaves out the colorful names. “Wrong answer, puta. Tell me what I want to know, or we have a night of fun together. We’ll make it a threesome. Me, you, and my shiny steel blade.” I run the edge of it along his jugular and then trail it slowly down his completely nude and exposed member.

Larry’s trembling, and he should be. The man is between a rock and a hard place with no easy way out, and that’s where I’m going to keep him until he tells me exactly what I need to know. “I won’t ask you again,” I say.

“New Orleans. They’re getting ready to take her.” He chokes out an address with a stream of blood, and Dereck texts it into his cell.

“Who’s behind the local trafficking? Who does R.J. take his orders from?”

“He’ll kill us both if I tell you, and you know it!”

“Name!” I press the blade against his skin, barely drawing a drop of blood, but it’s enough to get him talking. He may act like a tough man with the ladies, but he’s anything but sitting here with no clothes on and a shriveled dick between his legs. Once Larry starts talking, he doesn’t filter a goddamn word. “Bernatelli, he calls the shots. His right-hand man sets the deals up and manages everything, but Bernatelli runs everything behind the scenes. He has connections worldwide, and you just ensured yourself a spot on his target list. You know what happens then?” Larry’s grinning now because he thinks he can intimidate me, and scaring the ladies gives him a thrill.

“Tell me, big man? What do you think Bernatelli and his stool pigeons will decide to do to me? Will I like it?” I ask, running my blade against the

side of his throat to reiterate who's really in charge.

“R.J.’s going to make you pay, nice and slow. He’s going to use you until his temper dies down, and then he’s going to pass you around to the boys who’ve been sniffing around that pussy he’s been protecting. The boss ain’t gonna shelter you no more, and when everyone’s done with you? That’s where the fun starts. You’re going to get a first-class ticket on a boat, shoved into a box where no one will find you until you’re overseas. Then it’s going to start all over again, and again, and again, you bitch!”

I don’t even have a chance to react before Dereck grabs him by the neck and lays him out cold with a solid punch to his face before tossing him on the bed. I take a deep breath in, absorbing it all, steadying myself because what Larry says is an accurate portrayal of what happens to hundreds of women who run through this club, and that’s what I need to remember every single time I get even a little bit soft. Larry moves, and I reach into my pocket, pull out a drug-soaked handkerchief and stuff it over his nose, keeping him still with the end of my knife pressed to his throat while it does its work. “Sleep well, puta,” I say as he drifts to sleep.

“We don’t have long before the parking lot fills up with the guys who’ve bought time with the others in the trailer.” I pull a tie out of the pocket of my robe, wrapping it tightly around Larry’s mouth and the back of his head to keep the material firmly in place and his mouth quiet in case he comes around sooner than expected. I make quick work of his hands and feet, tying them to the shoddy rails of the overused trailer bed with the rope I’ve brought. He may be able to bust through them fairly quickly, but it will slow him down enough for my purposes.

I look up, and Dereck observes the area outside through a crack in the door. He turns to me, relinquishing whatever he’s watching for a moment. He looks at me with those deep, questioning eyes, the ones that appear to see right through me, waiting for an explanation, one he’s probably entitled to after a night like tonight, but one I can’t give him. I won’t.

I shake my head. There’s no possible way he would understand. “Don’t ask, but I wasn’t pimping myself. I just needed an excuse to be outside in case someone missed me. We need to go now. You and your friends have the information you need to help Bryanna. I have no doubt you’ll take care of her and Kallie, papi.” I walk toward him because he’s still standing by the door, keeping me from Bernatelli, and that will never do.

Dereck’s cell beeps. He looks down at it and then back up to me.

“There’s a group of men from the club on their way over to the trailer. We’ll talk later, but for now, stay in the trailer and out of sight.”

I start to say something, but there’s no time. It’s not like it will matter shortly anyway because in less than half an hour, I’ll be long gone and nothing more than a fleeting memory.

Dereck steps out of the trailer, holding the door open. He stands on the top step with only seconds to spare, efficiently eliminating the men’s ability to close us into the small space and overpower us as a result. “What seems to be the problem, boys? I paid for a little fun tonight, and you’re disrupting the party,” Dereck says to the heavy-handed bouncers of the club and R.J.’s right-hand men.

The tall, skinny man with a scraggly beard points his finger in my direction. “Boss has been looking all over the place for your ass. What the hell are you doing out here?”

Dereck doesn’t take his eyes off our assailants. “Do as I asked, Layla.”

It’s that deep, commanding voice, the one that sends pulses of delight down my spine and straight to my center. I shouldn’t like it, especially at a time like this, but there’s no denying the magnetic attraction to his quiet dominance or the desire and need that pulses through me. I have little or no time to think about it further because although I can take care of myself and those men too, Dereck pulls the door closed, leaving me inside of the trailer.

I should be out there helping him, kicking ass and taking names, but it’s a little too late for that. I’ll stay out of sight unless he needs help. I slide up to the RV’s front seat so that I can look out the window. Dereck’s team wouldn’t just send him a text and leave him to fend for himself with a group as large as that. They must be waiting close by, and that gives me some sense of reassurance.

I turn in the captain’s chair, feeling around for the window crank, and roll down the window on the old unit just a crack, careful not to draw attention to it or myself. The tall skinny one, called Pete, puts his foot on the first step. “I’d stay right where you are, or better yet, turn around, head back into the bar, and pretend you didn’t see us out here. This is a private affair, and you’re not invited to the party,” Dereck says.

“Yeah, but the whore you’re fooling around with is private property. She belongs to the boss, and my boys are gonna show you exactly what happens when you mess around with what doesn’t belong to you.”

My jaw clenches with aggravation. It’s the same gnawing anxiety that

bubbles up every single time R.J. refers to me as his whore, or his slut, or whatever name he wants to call me at the time, every single day for the last three weeks since he decided to make me his woman.

“As I said, we’re not looking for an audience,” Dereck says.

Pete keeps his eyes on Dereck, but he doesn’t look worried. He must feel pretty confident with his odds, backed up by all the goons he has standing behind him, because he starts climbing the stairs.

“I won’t ask you again. Take your boys and go back to the bar,” Dereck demands.

The skinny guy laughs, a harsh, forced, and unnatural laugh, but his eyes aren’t laughing. Pete’s quick; I’ll give him that. He’s had his hands down by his side, and even watching him, waiting for what he may do, he managed to maneuver his gun out pretty fast, at least from my sideways view of the show.

I ready my piece to take the sons of bitches out if Dereck and his team need help, but that’s not how this show is playing out.

Dereck kicks the gun out of the skinny guy's hand, and it goes flying into the air, landing with a thud in the mud-caked dirt. Pete barrels forward, up the stairs, but Dereck sends his assailant over the rail with a powerful kick to the stomach. “Don’t just stand there—get him!” the man yells from the ground.

The five remaining men start forward, but Dereck grasps the railing, raises his body and sends both of his feet into the chest of the next man up the stairs. It sends him reeling backward, and Dereck repeats the motion sending the powerful thrusts of his feet into the face of the next man trying to get up the stairs. The others jump out of the way, let the falling men clear the stairs, and then race up the first two steps. That’s as far as they get because Dereck takes the next one out with another powerful kick to the chest, punch to the face, and a chop to the neck that leaves him fallen to the ground and groaning in pain, and then he takes the last one down.

The other men aren’t getting up. They’re just watching, not one of them moving a muscle, all just waiting for it to end. Two men stand watching the show, waiting to see if they need to step in and help their partner.

It’s not going to take long for Dereck to clean up the mess and head back into the trailer. I slide from my seat and onto the bed in the back of the RV, crank the long oblong window open, and remove the screen. It works just like it did Saturday night after the show. I do it like I practiced, shimmying out backward and landing on my feet. I survey the area around me. Dereck is

talking to the two men who watched the show from a distance. I sneak toward the hedges that line the parking lot and then take the path down to the park, letting the darkness and all the greenery around me shroud my getaway.

The rental car is parked in the clearing, right where it's supposed to be. One person in the world knows my plan to leave R.J. and this life tonight. The only person trusted enough to leave me the rental vehicle and move my bags from my car to this one during my show, and she's safe with Trent. I unlock the car and slide into the driver's seat of the sporty little black BMW, throw my purse on the floor, and adjust the seat and rearview mirror, slowly inhaling.

Finally, at long last, I have a name, a real lead on the person who means the world to me. I almost scream, startled by a quick rap on the passenger side window. I try to catch my breath as Dereck opens the passenger door and slides in beside me. "Where are we heading, princess?"

Chapter 9

Dereck

The park lights cast just enough light across the car to see the startled and then indignant look the fiery seductress gives me. “What are you doing here? Why do you keep showing up?” she huffs.

“You keep getting into trouble, princess. Now drive, before the men who raced out of that bar start searching the park. Keep your lights off until we get to the exit,” I tell her, pointing to the break in the curb that will allow us to navigate back to the highway.

Layla purses her lips. “You can hang out with me for a while, but when we get to the other side of the city, I’m going to drop you off. I have plans, papi, and they don’t include you!”

I hold in my laughter, but I can’t help smiling at the fiery little beauty. “We’ll see about that, Layla.”

She grips the steering wheel tighter and presses into the gas. “I’m serious. I’ll drop you off anywhere you want. I appreciate everything you did back there, and I’m sorry you got caught up in all the drama, but I didn’t ask you to follow me!”

“Uh-huh. I know, princess,” I say, harnessing my amusement at her irritation with me.

“What do you want? How do I get rid of you?” She huffs, easing onto the ramp and then flooring the sporty little car as she merges into the oncoming lane of traffic.

“You don’t. Unfortunately for you, until we know Bryanna is safe, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what you’re not sharing. If it impacts Bryanna, I will learn the truth.” I leave out the fact that the men on my team have the Bryanna situation under control at the moment, largely in part to the

real-time information she was able to get from Larry.

“Why’s she so important to you,” Layla asks, her voice softening as she speaks of her friend. I recall Damian’s word of caution on how protective she is over Bryanna, and she’s certainly shown that side of herself tonight.

“Bryanna’s important to my employer. He needs us to get to the bottom of her disappearance and bring her home. Until she’s delivered, you’re stuck with me, and based on what I heard back at the RV, we’ve just stumbled into the middle of an incredibly large international trafficking operation.”

“This day just went from bad to worse!” Layla’s eyes never leaving the road while she talks. Layla is a skilled driver who weaves in and out of the fast, heavy traffic with precision and ease. My eyes fall to her high-heeled feet and deliciously slinky bare legs, all the way up to the parted robe that falls just above those luscious thighs, the ones I’d like to have wrapped tightly around my neck while I’m feasting on her pussy.

She feels my eyes heating her skin. Her chest expands prettily, with each increased inhalation, almost in rhythm to the thrumming of blood in my dick. “What’s the plan for the little outfit and the robe? Are you going to wear that to Bernatelli’s, or are we stopping to change somewhere?”

Her mouth purses with indignation. “Look, I got everything out of that slimebag that I could to help Bryanna. You know what I know, so now it’s time to part ways. I obviously can’t go back to the bar after what happened. R.J. and his goons will be looking for me all over, and as soon as Larry wakes up, he’s going to tell R.J. exactly what happened. I have a small amount of time to get to Bernatelli’s before all hell breaks loose, and that’s not a two-person job.”

“A couple of things we should get straight since we’re going to be spending quite a bit of time together. First, Larry isn’t about to tell a soul he gave you Bernatelli’s name. They would kill him in an instant if they knew he outed the boss. I initially thought R.J., being the jealous hothead that he is, would come after you too, but I have it on good authority that he and his friends just got into a car and are hightailing it to a private airport right this very minute. So, no one’s coming after you, princess. That means we can hole up for the night, and you can tell me exactly what you intend to get out of Bernatelli and how it’s going to help Bryanna. Then we can develop a plan that doesn’t involve busting down the gates of his highly guarded mansion in your underwear.”

She squeezes the steering wheel tighter. “See, you have this entire

scenario all wrong, papi. I don't know what gave you the impression that I would take orders from you, but let me assure you, I won't. See, I have my own set of plans, and as I said, they don't include you, so where to?"

She is quite intoxicatingly lovely when she's all fired up. "Take the next off-ramp and head toward the water. We're going to stay at The Prestian Towers for the night and talk. If after that you still want to do things on your own, I'll consider it."

"You have to be the most arrogant, insufferable man I've ever met!" Layla says, taking her frustration out on the gas pedal, causing us to soar by the cars in the slow lane like they're standing still.

"You might want to ease off the gas before you miss your turn."

Layla's pretty red lips purse in annoyance. She ignores me and instead lays her foot onto the gas pedal even harder. The car pulls forward so fast the intensity sucks me back in the seat. We fly by the next two vehicles, then she cuts over to the right lane, sliding through a break in traffic to get to the off-ramp before she begins to slow down for the light ahead.

I hide my amusement and admiration for her driving skill. "Okay, papi. We'll do some things your way, but only because I'll do whatever it takes to make sure Bryanna is okay; tell you anything that will help her, but after that, my plans don't include you."

I take in the stark beauty of her features against the light from the city lights overhead. Layla looks both left and right and then left again. "Where the hell are we?"

"Chase Prestian, one of the co-owners who fronted our security business, owns the entire skyrise, and it serves as a resting place for my partners and me when we want to relax in the city or on a job. Take a right and then head down a mile or so. We'll come in from the back way," I tell her.

She nods, her eyes scanning this way and that before turning onto the main street that will take us to The Prestian Towers.

"If you take another right at the next traffic light, you can pull into the front entrance. The valet will take your car."

Layla doesn't say a word until we've reached the front of the skyrise. I open the window, gesturing Ramon, who's on duty most nights, over to the car.

"Hi, Dereck. I haven't seen you in a while and didn't hear that you were staying here tonight."

"It was a last-minute decision. Can you do me a favor and park the car in

the preferred lot?”

“Sure thing, Dereck. Just let us know if you need it, and we’ll have it brought round right away.”

“Thanks, Ramon. There are a few bags in the trunk. If you wouldn’t mind having someone send them up to our room, I’d appreciate it.”

“No problem at all,” Ramon says, grinning, while Layla’s eyebrows raise. I don’t answer her unspoken question. My team and I spying on her and the friend she had place them there while she was dancing won’t sit well, and some things are just better left unsaid.

I step out of the car and walk around to the driver's side. Layla has the window rolled down, and she’s still sizing up the situation. “Do you have a card with the valet number in case I want to leave sooner than planned?” Layla asks Ramon, who tries to hide his amusement at the sassy beauty behind the wheel.

“I sure do, Miss,” he says, stepping around and handing her one of the valet cards they usually reserve for customers who don’t live on the property.

I open the door for her and extend my hand. The change in her breath as she takes my hand tells me she’s as affected by my touch as I am to touching her delectable skin.

“Have a good night, and don’t take the car too far away,” I say to Ramon, as Layla looks on with amusement.

“I won’t be gone for more than a couple of hours! My date’s going to love this car,” Ramon jokes. He’s grinning from ear to ear, but his eyes go completely wide as Layla steps out of the car in her thigh-high sparkly red robe and stilted heels.

“Have fun with your date, Ramon,” I say, placing my hand on Layla’s lower back, ignoring the slack mouth of the valet at the sight of the half-dressed beauty as we walk past him and toward the red-faced bellman who greets us at the door.

“Alfred, can you give me a buzz if anyone enters the private elevator tonight? I’m not expecting anyone, especially this late, but that doesn’t mean one of the guys won’t stop by.”

“Will do, Dereck.”

We’re in the elevator and almost up to the penthouse before Layla says a word. Her breathing has increased, and her eyes are swirling with emotion. “I didn’t plan to walk through a reception area in my underwear and a robe that barely covers my ass.”

“It bothers you what people think?” I ask gently, touching her cheek with my finger as the elevator takes us upward.

Layla doesn’t answer, but her eyes tell me everything she doesn’t want to say. “What they think doesn’t matter, princess. Come on; let’s get you inside and settled for the night,” I tell her as the door opens. I lead her into the penthouse's hardwood covered living area and watch as her breath catches, taking in the view of the city from the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the room.

“What a spectacular view,” Layla says, walking toward the windows as I head to the dining room.

“It’s one of the best in Chicago. Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes, please, I’d love one after a night like tonight.”

I pour a glass for Layla and grab water out of the refrigerator for myself. She walks toward the kitchen and settles herself on a barstool before tucking her short red robe underneath her thighs. Layla's legs go on for days and end with slinky ankles and adorned with the straps of her sexy high heels that make it more than difficult for me to focus on anything else.

She continues to enjoy the view while I let the power of our chemistry and my primal attraction to her settle around us. I take a drink from the bottle of water and watch her lips caress the rim of her wine glass.

“Not drinking tonight?” she asks, nodding toward my bottle.

“No, I’m on call in the city tonight, so none for me. Why don’t we start with you telling me what you know about Bryanna? I have it on good authority things aren’t looking so good for your friend right now. I think you know a lot more than you’re letting on. You care to tell me about it?”

She purses her lovely lips at me. “We don’t need to play games, papi. The people who run that club are into more than paying girls to dance. They snatch women off the street, coerce them, or whatever it takes to get their filthy hands on them. Bryanna is the type of girl the European group is looking for, and she’ll bring in big dollars. If you’ve lived in this city for any length of time you know Bernatelli is behind most things illegal or has a financial interest in them, but everything’s hush-hush about his involvement with trafficking. Word on the street is that he doesn’t touch that business, but I’ve never believed that, but Larry confirmed it.”

“So you gave me the information we needed, and we’re taking care of Bryanna. Why not run if that’s all you were trying to do?”

“Why bring me here instead of helping me get to Bernatelli before we

lose the element of surprise? We could still go,” Layla snaps back, altogether avoiding the question.

“And do what, Layla? What did you have planned for tonight? Find out where he sends all the women? How he gets paid? What is it that you’re looking for, princess? Tell me that, and perhaps I’ll help you. But letting you walk into a dangerous situation on my watch without a well-developed plan isn’t likely to occur, especially in your very sexy attire,” I say, letting my eyes wander down the length of her delectable body.

Layla’s eyes instinctively lower. Her nipples harden to peaks underneath the silky robe as she contemplates an answer, causing my cock to throb with desire for the fiery dark-haired beauty with a submissive aura that calls to my dominant side with a force that I’ve never experienced.

“I want to help the rest of the girls at the club too. I come from the wrong side of the tracks. I know how to handle myself. The others? They’ve never seen the city’s underbelly or the horror that lives just past their beautiful suburbs. They’re too frightened to do anything more than obey their captors once they’ve been kidnapped. There are more and more girls taken every single day. I’m sick of Bernatelli and his entire army stealing women off the street and then selling them to the highest bidder. I can stop it, si, papi? With one well-placed move, I can stop it,” Layla says, reaching into her purse and showing me the shiny steel of her blade.

I slide onto the barstool next to her, watching her chest rise with each lovely inhalation of her breath. I push a lock of her long dark hair off her shoulder so I can see her face. “Look at me, Layla.” I drawing her to me with a slight touch to her chin.

She turns slowly, and her eyes are a myriad of swirling emotions. “I’m not the type of dominant who likes lies, secrets, or a woman’s eyes downcast. I want to know and see what she’s feeling, every single minute, okay, Princess?”

Layla’s audible intake of air is telling, as is the color in her fingers from grasping the wine glass harder. “You’ve misread the signals, papi. You see, there’s not a submissive bone in my entire body.”

I run my finger down the length of her neck, and she shivers on her stool. “Care to make a little wager on that, Princess?”

Chapter 10

Layla

Dereck's finger circles the top of my collarbone, causing a tingling sensation to grow in my center. Jesus, this man flips my girlie switch without even trying. Just the sound of his calm, reassuring, and all-knowing voice is arousing. It sends a shiver down my spine and a delicious tingle straight below, but he's not going to know that. "I'm not submissive. You'd lose all your money, papi."

"Then you have everything to gain and nothing to lose with a harmless bet. All you have to do is answer a few simple questions, Layla, and remember, no lies because I will know, and lying goes against my rules."

The way he looks at me with those steely grays, intent and simmering with unspoken passion, makes my center clench with girlie desire.

"I'm not accustomed to waiting for a response, princess. Tell me what I want to hear. Tell me you're as spirited and adventurous as I think you to be. A simple bet to prove your point, Layla."

"Yes," I whisper, the affirmation coming from my traitorous lips before my brain has time to realize that getting him interested in a game of questions about my sexual proclivities to get his mind off my indiscretions is one of the worst ideas in the world and just a lie to no one but myself. The draw to this man is undeniable, and I want this interaction like I haven't wanted anything in a long time.

"Good girl," Dereck says while I take a large gulp of my wine.

He sweeps my hair to one shoulder. "I like your neck exposed to me, Layla. It allows me to see the beat of your pulse," Dereck says, caressing it lightly before taking my wine glass and pushing it away. "No drinking while we talk."

The sound of his lowered voice and instruction washes over me, and I let it. The silence follows, fueling the desire he creates. I wait for his questions, watching a spot beneath us, looking anywhere except into his gray eyes, which would undoubtedly tell him everything that I do not want him to know.

He's silent, in no hurry at all, while the heat of his gaze penetrates me with its warmth. My breath catches as I realize he's waiting, waiting for me to look at him instead of the floor. I glance up, and the intensity of his scrutiny is enough to take my breath away.

“Very good. Ready, Layla?”

I nod, swallowing down my nerves.

“Words, princess.”

I should be fighting this, keeping up the pretense, but he has a way of drawing out every bit of the submissiveness that I've pushed away for so long. “Yes.”

“Let's set the rules first, then—no lying, or telling white lies or half-truths during this time. If you do, I will know, and there will be consequences, Layla. They will be within your limits, which we will discuss shortly, but I will administer them. Can you agree to that?”

His words are hypnotic. I find myself enthralled, hanging on his every word and wanting more. “Yes.”

His steely gray orbs penetrate mine, searching while I wait. “Princess, you're not trying very hard to convince me that you're not submissive. Why?”

I should be nervous, but the thought is entirely overpowered by desire and need. “Because the act of pretending would be a half-truth.”

He nods and caresses down the length of my neck. “Very good, Princess. Did the thought of a consequence deter you, or was it something else?”

I swallow hard, keeping the eye contact he's asked for intact. “Something else.”

He watches intently, allowing me time and space to form my feelings and thoughts into words. “I'd like to know what that is, to keep playing and learn more about you, but you're under no obligation since you've told me the truth. What made you want to tell me the truth if it wasn't the consequence, Layla?”

“I knew it would make you happy. This attraction hasn't happened to me for a very long time, and I didn't want to push it away.”

He caresses down the length of my neck, sending a delicious shiver down

my spine. “Layla, the attraction is not one-sided, but we both know you’re going to have to tell me your secrets at some point. Are you ready to trust me, princess? Are you ready to tell me who you are, why you’re pretending to be someone who died, why you’re hell-bent on getting to Bernatelli, and what your real name is?”

“That’s a lot of questions,” I say, swallowing. Dereck has done everything he could to help me, and I know that he and Trent are helping both of my friends get away from the people who want to sell them for nothing more than someone’s sexual gratification at this very minute. He prevented R.J. from finding me to keep me protected, calls me princess, and lights every submissive neuron in my body on fire. “I can tell you most of the things you want to know.”

“That’s an honest answer. Let’s get comfortable, Layla, and then you can tell me what you’re able to share.” Dereck takes my hand and leads me from the stool to the sofa. He pulls a throw pillow from the corner, sits on the couch, and then places the cushion between his feet. “I want you to kneel for me while we talk. He turns me facing away from him and guides me to the floor, placing me into the position he wants on the cushion in front of him.

Dereck gathers my hair away from my neck, placing it all over one shoulder, grazing the length of exposed skin with a finger. “You can take this at your own pace, princess. When you’re ready,” he says, in that deep voice that sets my center on fire. He slides his fingers through the thickness of my hair, parting the long strands with care. I take a deep breath as he continues to play with and then braid my hair.

The story is straightforward. I’m surprised at how easy it comes to my lips without ever having had to speak it before. “Somebody murdered my cousin. I was too late to prevent it, but I saw it happen.”

He caresses the side of my neck. “I’m sorry you saw that, princess. What happened?”

I sigh. “It’s been over a month, and I still can’t get the picture out of my mind. My cousin was bartending and got an offer to go out back for a side job.”

“Meaning?”

I shrug. “You know, the guy gets off, my cousin gets paid. It happens. Even in the nicest of places. It happens.”

Dereck gently tugs the end of my hair with his hand. “There, all done. The braid allows your neck to be completely exposed to me, just the way I

like it,” he says gently into my ear while caressing down the length of my neck.

A shiver runs down the length of my spine, and he outlines it with the tip of a finger, letting it trail to my lower back. “Now, tell me what happened, all of it, Layla.”

The same feeling of helplessness every time I think about my cousin envelopes me. I shrug. “The man got off, but she didn’t get paid. That’s not what he was after, not entirely anyway. Once they finished, he tried to snatch her. He was working for the trafficking industry, and damn it, she just looked too good for that puta to pass up,” I say, barely holding back the tears.

“Turn and face me, Layla.”

I take a deep breath, willing the tears to remain at bay while I turn to face him on the cushion. The heat of his gaze causes me to look up. He slides a hand behind my neck and positions me so that his eyes meet my own.

They survey me keenly, and his other hand encloses my wrist, lifting it, placing a finger on my pulse. “Relax, princess,” he says, trailing his fingers from behind my neck down its length to my collarbone while my nipples turn to hardened points, straining for his touch.

“Somehow, you learned the man who killed your cousin worked at R.J.’s club, and you decided to take matters into your own hands and find out who he and the others are working for?”

That conclusion is precisely what anyone hearing the story was supposed to deduce, so a success by those measures. “Not exactly. She worked at a different club, but you’re close enough,” I say, not entirely a lie.

Dereck rubs the short hairs of his chin as he observes me, looking down at me, still watching me with those intense, steely eyes. “Are you going to tell me why you were going after Bernatelli tonight? We have things with your friend Bryanna under control, and you know she’s not there. She’s under my team’s protection, so why go to Bernatelli’s if not for her? Revenge for the young woman, your cousin?”

“Maybe a little bit,” I say, swallowing back the emotion that always threatens just thinking about it.

He lifts my chin with the tip of his finger as I try to look away, struggling to keep the tears away. “Look at me, princess. Tell me why, if not for that?”

I haven’t talked about this situation with one other person on this earth, and the caring tone of his voice when I’m this vulnerable is too much to deal with right now. I feel the tears spill and intend to dry them, but he’s already

there, stroking my cheeks and wiping them as they fall.

“My sister was kidnapped too, about a month ago. These people took both of them from me.” I shrug. “So I started working at the club to see what I could learn. Tomorrow at midnight, it will be four full weeks with not one sign of my sister. It’s like she’s vanished into the air, not one trace.”

“Did you learn anything that will help except for what Larry told you tonight?”

I shake my head, feeling the overwhelming helplessness close in around me. “It took me this entire time to get close to R.J. I was hoping to find her that way, but the puta doesn’t make a mistake. Not one slip up, or one word of who he works for, or anything that will help, not one damn thing! Nothing! And then he saw me with you, and it blew that avenue all to hell. He was never going to trust me after that.”

“We’ll find her, Layla.” His voice is calm and soothing, but time is not on our side.

“I don’t have time. Every minute is a minute too long. For all I know, they sold her, and she’s overseas by now. I just keep holding on to the hope that they’ve wanted to keep her local, move her around from bar to bar, keep her making a little local money before selling her to the big spenders overseas,” I say, wiping away the damn tears that will not stay at bay.

Dereck leans down and lifts me into his arms, pressing me against his chest. “Let your tears fall, Layla. We’ll find her. We’ll develop a plan and look for your sister. We have an entire team dedicated to protecting people like her, okay?” he says, looking down at me.

It feels so good to share some of the burdens with the strength of this man. I simply nod, nestling against the comfort of just being in his arms.

“I’ve grown quite fond of your name, Layla. Tell me your real name?” Dereck coaxes, gazing down at me.

I smile at that. “It’s Layla. By some strange eery coincidence, my name is Layla,” I say, my body thrumming with desire as he holds me.

“I’m glad, princess. Tonight, we’re going to get rid of some of your stress, and then you’re going to rest and think about what we’ve talked about while I work on finding out a little bit more about Bernatelli. We’ll have breakfast in the morning and start working on a plan to find out where your sister is.”

I start to argue, but he places a finger on my lips. “Enough worrying tonight. It will do nothing but compound things further, and there are far

better ways to spend the night,” Dereck says, picking me up as he stands and straightens with me in his arms.

“Your bed or mine, princess?” Dereck asks, looking down at me.

Chapter II

Dereck

Layla has wrapped her arms around my neck, her pulse is racing, and her eyes have widened, reflecting the same desire I feel for the dark-haired beauty in my arms.

“Yours,” she says in an exhaled breath.

I carry Layla to my room. She is watchful, and her eyes have gone hazy. I caress her cheek, trailing to her red-tinted lips, watching as her pulse increases and her eyes dilate. I ease her from my arms gently, letting her slide down the length of my body, until her feet touch the floor and she stands before me. “Raise your arms, princess, so that I can undress you for bed.” She does what I’ve asked without hesitation. I caress her skin, taking in her exotic beauty before sliding the red robe from her shoulders and letting it pool to the floor behind her.

Layla is the most magnificent woman I’ve ever seen, and the magnetic desire for her is intoxicatingly strong. A combination of emotions pass over her features, one of passion and submissiveness at the same time. A unique mixture that draws me to this beauty as no one has before. I kiss down the side of her neck, and she shivers in place. I tug gently at the seductive string around her neck, allowing her magnificent breasts to bounce freely, giving me an entirely private display of her high, firm, and perfectly shaped breasts. “You are exceptionally beautiful, princess.” I watch her eyes smolder as I caress the hardened peaks with my thumb.

She arches slightly, ever gently, pushing into the palms of my hands. “Patience, Layla,” I tell her, ending the contact to her nipples and letting the meaning set in without words. She will learn to accept her pleasure in and allow me to build her anticipation and pleasure with time. Instead, my fingers

trail her tight and elongated abdomen, gliding over her smoothness, and letting her uncertainty of where I might go build her desire. I skim the white lace trim of her red panties and touch the red bow in the center. “Turn for me, Layla,” I instruct, and she spins on her sexy heels in front of me without question.

I take in the tight muscles of her rear, firm but curvy and feminine, sitting atop her gazelle-like legs, decorated in the G-string panties. “Absolute perfection, princess,” I tell her, sliding my fingers into the waistband and slipping them over her hips, letting them float the length of her legs before gathering around her ankles. I hold one of her hands. “Step out of your panties, and turn to face me, Layla. I want to look at you.”

Layla shivers as I give her instruction, but she does as I ask. One leg at a time, she sliding them past her as she spins to present herself entirely nude to me for the first time. She bites her lip and looks at the floor before remembering my instruction, waiting, nervous and uncertain, and so intoxicatingly submissive that it makes my cock throb. My fingers circle the tip of her breasts, watching her breath catch, but she holds the position and doesn’t try to anticipate or take pleasure before I’ve given it.

“That’s it, princess,” I praise, stroking both of Layla’s nipples as a reward before trailing one finger down her abdomen to the top of her bare mound. I step closer, watching her eyes smolder as my cock strains against the material of my pants in an effort to reach her heat.

The little sound of pleasure Layla makes causes my balls to tighten with constrained need. When my spirited but deferential beauty looks up at me, seeking approval, my cock throbs hard, knowing what a perfect match she is for a man like me.

I grasp her neck, caressing the sensitive skin and watching her eyes smolder up at me before pulling her close and capturing her lips with a passion intended to arouse and inflame. I coax her lips, and Layla parts for me. She tastes like red wine, sweet and complex, and is so utterly intoxicating that I fear my plan for her tonight will be difficult to achieve.

I break the heat of our kiss because my restraint will be needed, and Layla makes that exceptionally hard, standing before me and looking at me with those smoldering eyes. “Soon, princess. Come, let’s get you into bed,” I tell her, calling on all of my willpower not to give her what she wants until I’m ready.

“Lay on the bed, Layla. Face down for me, princess.”

She does as I ask without hesitation or fear, gracefully settling onto the covering. “Stretch your arms over your head, Layla,” I instruct, watching her as she so perfectly follows my direction.

I push her long braid to one side of her shoulder. “Stay still and wait for me, princess.” I walk into the bathroom to gather what I need before returning. “You’re going to feel a slight warmth drizzled onto your body. Are you ready, Layla?” I ask.

She stretches and wiggles her toes, elongating her intoxicatingly beautiful body in my bed and causing my cock to throb with desire before she responds. “Yes.”

I drizzle the warmth of the scented oil onto her skin. “You’re going to feel my hands on you now.” I slowly massage her neck and shoulders, working my way down the length of her toned and moistened body.

She nuzzles my pillow as I caress her.

“Quiet your mind, Layla. Think of the ocean as the tide comes onto the shore and then returns to its home. Inhale deeply as it comes in and then exhale as it returns,” I tell her, finding numerous knots, all signs of her worry. My hands work while she breathes in and out, relaxing her mind and body as I’ve instructed.

I reach into the heating unit and take out one of the stones, carefully running it across my palm before touching her delicate skin with its heat. “Continue to breathe, Layla, in and then out,” I encourage, and she falls back into sync with the pattern of the ocean I’ve instructed her to invoke. She moans her appreciation as the warmth touches her. I circle the stone, adding a second one with my other hand, letting her grow accustomed to the pattern before moving across the same path as my hands have been for the last half hour.

I unbraid her hair and then turn her to face me, laying the long, dark waves around both sides of her shoulders. Now the dark, fiery angel with a submissive core is absolute perfection. I lean one knee on the bed beside her, pressing my lips to her soft warmth, relishing in how she parts for me. The desire and magnetism are intense and like nothing I’ve ever experienced. I want to go slow with Layla and get to know every smooth inch of her delectable body, but using restraint with Layla takes all of my control. I caress her with my finger, running it along her soft cheek and over the fullness of her lips, rewarded with the sexiest sigh I’ve ever heard. I stroke the side of her neck and let my fingers find her pulse as my tongue runs over

her lips, seeking more, delighting in the way she stays pliant but responsive, and waiting for me to coax her lips apart so I can explore her sweetness.

My tongue finds hers, guiding it in a sensual dance, stoking my passion for this fiery beauty who tried to hide her submissive side from me. I take my time, memorizing her sweetness with every taste of her velvety warmth.

She's breathless, and her eyes have hazed over by the time I seal our kiss. "I won't rush this, Princess. I want to build your desire until you can no longer stand it." I gently kiss her lips one more time, a promise of my return, before wandering lower, teasing the velvety softness of the delectable expanse of her neck, and memorizing the pulse beneath my lips.

Layla purrs softly as I make my way into the sensitive dip between her shoulder and neck, a soft feminine sound that causes my balls to tighten with unreleased need. I continue my path, delighting in her desire but inexperience with a man taking charge and her sweet surrender.

My hands trail down her body, cupping the slight weight of her exquisitely shaped breasts with my palms. I let my fingers graze over Layla's sensitive nipples already straining with her need. I stroke them, rewarded with her soft moan of desire, letting me know she is more than ready.

"Patience, princess." I brush her lips gently, sealing our kiss before standing to undress. I watch as her eyes deepen with passion until I finish. I lay next to her, bringing her against me, holding her, and molding us together. I tilt Layla's chin, wanting to see the emotion she usually hides. Her body softens into me as I continue to stroke her velvety skin. My princess may be intense and relentless to those who threaten the ones she wishes to protect, but in my bed, she is supple and submissive and more than perfect.

Her deep brown eyes are focused on me, and the golden flecks are dancing with her need. She moans softly, leaning into my touch and the warmth of my lips as I caress her. I kiss the sensitive area between her breasts, then each of her tips, before taking them one by one into my mouth. Her eyes remain locked with mine, and the smoky desire swirling in her depths causes my cock to throb with an insatiable need.

I alternate rolling the delicate and sensitive flesh between my finger and thumb and then kissing them to take away the sting. Layla purrs with pleasure as I learn what she likes, causing my cock to throb as it strains to get closer to her heat.

I make my way down her body, slowly, allowing our desire to build like a slow simmer, stoking it with soft caresses as I cherish the beauty unwrapped

before me. I keep her waiting and relish in watching as her breathing patterns change and the emotion of her eyes turns dark and murky with her desire.

I slide down the bed and stroke the curve of her calves, slowly making my way up those gazelle-like legs. One thigh to the other, I lick along her inner thighs before nuzzling against the bare softness of her pussy.

I stroke down Layla's mound with my finger, one stroke over her clit and right to her center.

She inhales a breath deeply as I gather her wetness, watching me closely as I do. Her brown eyes flicker with need, and she flushes rose as I taste her from my finger. I hold her gaze as I sink lower, allowing my tongue to wash over her clit.

Layla purrs her pleasure, causing my balls to tighten with their need.

I take my time, circling her mound with the warmth of my tongue, but she's so turned on and hasn't once tried to take her pleasure, instead, accepting what I give at the pace at which I give it. I reward her by caressing her with my tongue, sliding it over her soft, velvety folds.

"Dereck."

My name on her sensual lips makes the dominant desire to claim every inch of her flood to the surface. I dip into her center and lick her wetness and the creaminess of her need. I caress every inch of my princess, devouring her sweetness as she grasps the bedsheets and murmurs my name over and over. She's close, and with time, Layla will learn the pleasure of delayed gratification, but not tonight.

"You can come when you're ready, princess."

I draw the sensitive nub into the warmth of my mouth, suckling and causing her to inhale a sharp breath. Layla writhes on the end of my tongue, but I'm far from done. I continue to caress and suck, sending her into a spiraling orgasm that I don't let end until she is thrashing from side to side and calling out my name over and over as I claim what's mine.

I push her knees up farther, wrapping myself while she watches with those expressive wide-open brown eyes. I swipe the end of my cock through her cream, and her tongue runs over her lower lip.

I push in, straight to the velvety heated hilt. Layla is hotter than my dreams, and it takes effort to hold myself in check.

She moans that soft, seductive purr that causes my balls to ache. I let her acclimate, but only for a moment before sliding out and driving in hard.

Layla gasps, and I know exactly when I've found that special little spot,

the one that will drive her crazy and send her over the edge. Every time the end of me hits it, she bucks and purrs precisely the way she sounds in my dreams.

Her sexiness fuels my need, driving the intensity of my thrusts as my body gains momentum, seeking and giving her what she needs, each time harder and faster, hitting that little button every single time. Layla's head thrashes from side to side, and she screams my name. I thrust even harder, sending us both hurtling over the edge as waves and waves of our desire for each other collide.

Layla's drifting, half asleep and half awake, completely relaxed, but the nervous energy will return her thoughts to her sister unless given a distraction. "Tell me, princess, has anyone taken you from behind, right here," I say, sliding an oiled finger through the crack of her bottom.

She half opens her eyes with a lazy, embarrassed looking smile. "I'm not exactly a virgin, but no one has been there."

I find her answer exceptionally pleasing, reaching over to the nightstand for a training plug among the other toys. I unwrap the packaging and lubricate the length, waiting until she opens her eyes for me.

"There you are." I stroke the plug as her tongue glides along her lower lip.

"My finger first and then a second before the plug. It's small, but you'll still know it's there. Are you ready, princess?" I ask.

She answers on a whispery breath, "Yes."

"Very good. Flip over, princess." I circle her opening with my finger before inserting it, letting her acclimate before adding another digit. She accepts them well, but I give her time to adjust to the size and newness. "Breathe in deep, Layla," I instruct, sliding the plug into her channel as she follows my instruction.

Her body tightens, but she is completely accepting of my gift. It clicks into place, and I stroke down the cheeks of her rear, before covering her for the night.

"Sleep, Princess. Dream about the sound of the ocean and feel of my plug. Let it be a reminder of who you are with and build your anticipation of what's to come."

Chapter 12

Layla

I wake in the morning after the most incredibly restful night. I haven't slept that well in a long time, if ever. There's a note lying on the pillow next to me, and I can't help the smile it brings. No one has ever left a message on my pillow the day after. *Morning, princess. Take a shower and join me for breakfast. Do not remove the plug.*

My lips tilt upward, breaking into a wide grin that I couldn't tame even if I wanted to. The plug was an ever-present reminder all night long of my decision to let go, be true to myself, enjoy what Dereck offers, and a stark wake up to how very much I want what he has to offer. I head to the bathroom, gingerly relieving myself, giddy as a schoolgirl while paying heed to his instruction before getting into the shower.

The water is warm, raining down from the dual-headed shower and pelting my skin gently from different angles. I lean back, letting the water rain onto my scalp and through my hair with a delicate pattern that is both relaxing and invigorating. The bath gel smells like lavender, and its scent surrounds me and fills the room.

I finish up in the shower's luxury, feeling energized and ready for the day. Dereck is already at the table, drinking a cup of coffee and working on his laptop. "Good morning."

He glances up and smiles, a broad, bright one that causes my chest to do little flip-flops. I internally chastise myself, ignoring the girlish response to this impossibly handsome man who has somehow managed to break through my defenses, set me on fire with need, sated me, and then put me to bed more relaxed and secure than I've felt in a very long time. "Morning, princess."

I gesture to the half-full coffee pot on the counter. "Would you like a little

more?” I ask, heading to the pot holding the caffeine I need.

“Sure, you’ll find a cup in the cupboard above it to the right, and your breakfast is in the microwave. It should still be warm.”

“Really? A dom who cooks? Now that’s interesting,” I say, refreshing his cup before pouring one for myself. I open the microwave and find a croissant laden with eggs and cheese.

“This looks amazing. I’m ravenous!”

Dereck gives me a wink. “You’d be surprised at my talents, but this was ordered from room service,” he says, smiling broadly.

“I don’t think I’ve slept that good in, well, a long time.” I slide into the chair beside him and bite into the flaky pastry.

“I’m not surprised, given what’s happened.” Dereck turns his laptop so that we can both look at the screen. “Why don’t you eat while we go over a few things that I learned last night.”

“You put me to sleep and then came out here to work?”

“I needed to touch base with the security team. There was a lot to do after that, and you needed the sleep.”

I nod, swallowing another bite of the delicious sandwich. “I did. Okay, let’s look at whatever you want to show me.”

He taps the screen in front of him with his forefinger. “Our team is no stranger to Bernatelli. Head of the crime syndicate in Chicago, he not only pulls strings here in the city and many other states but has pretty intense connections in the underground. We know firsthand from very recent experience that another group was running women and selling them overseas out of Chicago. The fact that Bernatelli is now involved is disheartening for many reasons. The man has far-reaching arms both here and overseas already without another collaboration such as this. It makes sense that he’s in bed with anyone who will make him money, though, and that’s been his modus operandi for years. Unfortunately, that’s unlikely to change. If he’s using the girls first and moving them around to different bars, he must be holding something over their heads and have plenty of supply to meet the European demand. That helps explain Bryanna being at the club, the women you work with, and perhaps your cousin and sister too.”

At the mention of Luisa, my chest tightens. I turn away because the longer it takes to find my sister, the greater the chances that I will never see her again. The very reason I gave everything up, walked out and away from everything I knew.

Dereck guides my face back toward his own. “Focus, princess, or the next plug I insert will have a remote vibrate on it so I can keep your attention focused on what’s at hand.”

I try not to let my mouth gape at his suggestion or visibly clench my thighs against the thought of the plug in my backside vibrating and how good that would feel.

He smiles. “I guarantee you, it would only be pleasurable for so long, and then the need to come would overtake the pleasure and become an intense deterrent, with denial,” Dereck says.

I close my mouth because I don't doubt that he knows exactly what he's talking about, and pleasure sounds like a much better route to pursue. “I'll have to remember that,” I say, still acclimating to this newfound sexual freedom and rewarded with another panty-melting smile.

“You'll be happy with that decision in the long run. Marenah is an operative who keeps a tight rein on Bernatelli's activities. Let's just say that she has a very personal interest in his indiscretions for various reasons, has a lot of information, and is gathering more as we speak. I connected with her last night, and she gave me access to her files. It includes a list of all the bars he owns and co-owns. She also has a directory of the clubs that Bernatelli and his cronies are known to protect, so those places could also be spots they use to move the women around.”

I assess him for a moment because he has an awful lot of information on the man in just a relatively short time.

“He and his cronies are probably holding a multitude of things over the owners as well as the girls. Bernatelli may have lent them money in the past, maybe protects their interests, uses their clubs as a front to launder money, or just runs their girls through their clubs, but the list in the city of Chicago alone is extensive. The good news is that Marenah is in the process of getting the division that deals with trafficking up and running, and she's all over this. Marenah and her small team are pulling in other resources to help look for your sister, but they're going to need a few things,” Dereck says, flipping over to his email. “We need a recent picture. She'll run it through various software systems to get images of what your sister may look like if they've altered her hair and makeup and such. This group Marenah's pulling together is damn good, and the odds of finding your sister are a hundredfold better with them at the helm in this investigation than if we do it alone. Are you good with that?”

I try to keep the excitement of the possibility of finding Luisa out of my voice. “I certainly won’t turn down any help offered.”

He rubs the short, dark hairs of his chin. “What she didn’t understand, and I couldn’t explain, was what you intended to do last night. I was joking about busting through his gates in your underwear, but not kidding completely. What was the real plan, Layla? You weren’t seriously going to take him out since you need information about your sister.”

I swallow hard. The woman in me, the one who loves coming out of hiding and sharing with him the side of me suppressed for too long, doesn’t want to lie; although, my other side knows that I need to walk a fine line if I’m going to find my sister. I choose my words carefully. “I planned to go to the bar, the one Larry told us about, and see what I could find. If they’re shifting girls around and my sister hasn’t shown up at R.J.’s yet, maybe she’s there. I know a little bit about how they operate the bar scene. I heard one of the bouncers say the owner there, Sammy, is rumored to have a better relationship with Bernatelli than R.J. The club is relatively small, just like R.J.’s, meaning not a ton of men or firepower. I was hoping to slip in as a dancer. The plan was to get noticed by the boss just like I did with R.J., hoping it would help me find Luisa quicker,” I say, swallowing as his eyes darken.

The steely grays hold me captive. “You were planning to get yourself tangled into a relationship with Sammy, after everything that R.J. put you through when he found you with me? The man would have seriously hurt you, Layla, and who’s to say that Sammy isn’t just like him?”

I shrug, finishing my coffee and pushing my empty plate aside. “I’m not proud of what I’m doing or what I had planned. It’s not like I had much of a choice, though. If the owner took the bait, and R.J. caught wind and raised hell, I could have played it off as R.J. just in a jealous tirade and wanting me back for himself. I was hoping it would play to my advantage since based on what I heard at the bar, I think Sammy is looking for any reason to sink R.J. with Bernatelli and take over his bar too.”

“This guy has seen you with R.J.?” Dereck asks.

“Yeah, I think just about anyone in his circles has by now. Most of the guys meet up at least once a week, and we were a thing for almost three weeks,” I say, swallowing down the shame and pushing it away. I had to do what was necessary for my sister, and I’m going to continue doing exactly that until I find her or learn that I won’t.

He's silent, rubbing those short dark hairs on his chin, observing me with those steely gray eyes.

"Please don't judge me, Dereck. She's my sister, and I make no apologies for what I needed to do. I would do it again and will do it again if it leads me to her. She's the only person I have left in this world."

"Princess, I'm not judging you. I'm just trying to figure out why, after our conversation and the things I learned, and the resources that my team and I can provide that you feel the need to lie to me, knowing that we will help and that it will both displease me and bring a consequence you may not thoroughly enjoy."

I've been frank, laying all my cards on the table except the ones that I can't. "Nothing I said is a lie, Dereck."

The heat of his stare burns through me. "I told you yesterday, a lie, a white lie, or half-truth all constitute lying in my book. If Sammy takes notice, then Bernatelli is sure to follow. We both know that's what you're after, but what's the plan? He's not likely to tell you anything more than R.J. did or Sammy will."

I'm not going to deny it, and I can't tell him anything more, so I shrug. "Who knows, maybe he'll tell me while he's fucking me."

Chapter 13

Dereck

Layla's back to throwing attitude and doesn't mean a word of what she just spouted. It's her preferred defense mechanism, but the thought of her screwing anyone other than me is more upsetting than it should be after knowing her for such a short time. If I didn't before, I know now this relationship will not follow my standard conventions. This woman pulls on my dominance and tests my willpower and constraint at every turn. Intriguingly, something about that only strengthens my attraction to this submissive beauty who has an intense and relentless desire to find her sister and manages to keep herself in trouble at every turn.

"Come here, Layla," I tell her, pushing back my chair so that I have room for her between my legs.

At first, she doesn't comply. It's only a momentary reaction, and I watch with interest as she contemplates my request. It pleases me to see her short-lived internal turmoil and that her passion and submissive desires overpower her need to stand ground on a boundary agreed upon and intentionally crossed.

I hold out my arm, grasping her hand as she walks between my legs, pulling her onto my thigh, balancing her while pushing the abundance of her hair to one shoulder so that I can see her face. "Why didn't you finish telling me the story? Tell me the true intent of your plan?"

She inhales deeply. "I thought you would try to stop me, and until we come up with a different plan that will lead me to my sister, it's still the only thing I can do to find her."

My jaw tightens with apprehension for my spirited beauty because not only does that put her in Bernatelli's bed, but it also puts her in the kingpin's

circle, both of which I find entirely un-fucking-acceptable. If he suspects for one minute that Layla is using him to glean information and find her sister, he will have her put on one of the next ships overseas, and she'll be another trafficking statistic. "The plan just got terminated."

Layla touches my cheek, sliding her fingers over my face, and the red manicured nail traces over my lip before she leans down and gently kisses them. "I love that you're worried about me, and I will submit to your wishes in everything but this, Dereck. In this, there is no choice for me. I won't stop until I find her."

"You'll submit to me, but defy me? It doesn't work that way, Layla," I tell her, knowing we haven't gone over any of the particulars of the rules and boundaries of a relationship together.

"Make one exception, Dereck."

She waits, watching me with those dark brown eyes, questioning and filled with concern.

"There's no need. We're going to find her, Layla, but not like that."

She inhales deeply. "If you figure out a different way to get to Bernatelli by tomorrow night, we'll use it. Otherwise, I don't have any other choice. I lost the opportunity to get Sammy interested in me last night, but you were probably right about Larry. He wouldn't snitch me out and make himself look bad, so I can still use the same plan, just a different day."

I let that settle, watching Layla as she contemplates the plan I've terminated. Nothing is calculating about what she tells me. I asked her for honesty, and that's precisely what I'm getting, raw honesty and a passionate, relentless need to get to her sister before it's too late, at any cost, even to herself.

I take a deep inward breath, unaccustomed to being given stipulations, the feelings of jealousy, or the need for unadulterated possession that this spirited beauty invokes.

I stand with Layla in my arms, and she immediately wraps hers around my neck, hanging on while I walk her to my room. "We'll finish this conversation later, Princess. You've misinterpreted the rules and my intentions with you," I say, setting her on her feet as we reach my room, watching with amusement as the feisty attitude dissipates. She lowers her eyes and digs her red painted toes into the plush carpeting.

"Did you keep your plug in while you were in the shower?" I ask, watching as she returns her gaze to me, struggling with the instinct to look

away.

“Yes.”

“Was it uncomfortable?” I ask, gauging her readiness and acceptance.

“No, it was surprisingly, umm ... nice,” she says. “Once I got used to it.”

I smile, reassured that she could sleep comfortably through the night with the training device firmly planted in her backside and that she is doing her best to submit to the challenges I’ve given her.

“Good,” I say, sliding my hand under the mountain of hair and cradling the back of her neck in my palm. I pull her so close that I can feel the heat of her body emanating onto mine.

She watches me with hazy lust-filled eyes. The energy around us is electric, filling my blood with fire as I take in this passionate woman who trusts me enough to give herself to me and bow to my plan to save her sister as long as it’s by tomorrow. I smile down at this fiery beauty who has filled my life with challenges, mystery, and interest. “Slip out of your pants, princess.”

Layla does as I’ve asked without hesitation. She shimmies from the tight material of her signature jeans, pushes them over her hips, and pulls them from her ankles with her toes. My princess is left standing in front of me in her tank top and a pair of silky white panties. I stroke a finger across her cheek, trailing it down the expanse of her creamy skin before pulling her to me and claiming her lips with an intensity that tells me what I’ve already begun to understand. This thing between Layla and me is more than sexual. It’s primal, fierce, and all-consuming. “Raise your arms,” I instruct, and she does it immediately, so willing and needy to submit to everything except changing her plan. I remove her shirt and stroke the firm and straining nipples, one at a time, and then both at once, circling and pressing them firmly between my fingers and thumbs.

The purr she makes courses through my blood and straight to my crotch. I do it once more, just to hear the sound of her pleasure again.

I guide her backward, letting her legs touch the edge of the bed before helping her onto her back and positioning her legs. “Stay still, Layla, and keep yourself spread for me,” I instruct, going to the bathroom closet where I’ve placed the toys I’ve ordered and had delivered in hopes that we would play.

When I return, her eyes are ever watchful and hazy with lust and anticipation. I lay the lube on the nightstand beside us, along with the newer

and larger plug. Her eyes widen at the size, but she says nothing, just turns her eyes back to me, accepting, responsive, and the most perfect of submissives. Her eyes go smoky as I undress, tracking every moment, heating my skin with the passion of her energy.

I kneel between her legs, raking my finger along the bottoms of her feet, her calves, and inner thighs, and Layla sighs with contentment. When I replace them with my tongue, allowing it to trail along the same path and making my way toward her center, she shivers with anticipation. I taste her, and she trembles with desire and unadulterated need, and that's the edge I keep her on until she's squirming and panting my name.

I lick Layla's sweetness one last time before slowly making my way up her body, kissing her mound, nuzzling her navel, and teasing her unmercifully. I keep her from going over, but just barely, before raising so I can run the head of my cock along her entrance.

"Ready for me, princess?" I ask, nudging forward, ever so slightly, using her cream to guide my way.

"Yes, so ready," Layla pants with her need, but she doesn't raise her hips. Instead, she waits for me to pleasure her. She is so responsive and perfect. I reward her by tilting her legs forward as I sink deep and to the very end of her.

"Dereck." The way she calls my name, that soft, seductively sweet sound that I've come to love, causes my balls to tighten with need.

I thrust in again, and then again, driving deeply into her while keeping her legs pushed to her front and utterly open to me so I can reach the end of her.

"It's so deep," she murmurs, tossing her head, wisps of lush hair falling across her face in the throes of passion.

"You're so close, princess, but you don't get to come until I tell you it's time. Raise your hips and keep them there, Layla."

Her hands tighten in the bedsheets, and her little pants are coming steadily, but she inhales deeply, showing me without words her acceptance of my instruction and attempt to please.

I grasp the end of her plug, tilting and sliding it from her rear, only to reinsert it on a moan that causes her to gasp. I slide in and out, building her need, listening to her sexy sounds and body pulse with her desire before removing it altogether.

She moans a soft little huff of frustration, tracking me as I show her the larger one, watching her eyes dilate before running it along her slick and

well-lubricated seam.

“So good,” Layla gasps, as I continue to tease her. Still, we’re not through until she gives me what I want, so I drive deeper, my cock furiously hitting the end of her over and over. Layla pants, thrashing in her desire, and only then do I insert the larger plug as I drive deep. She screams my name, bucking on the end of me, again and again as I ride us over the brink and keep us there, rocking her hard, extending her release, and holding her there before gently letting her come down in my arms until her trembling and my own finally subsides.

I roll her over, facing her, side to side, her thigh thrown on top of my own, still joined as one, her bottom still full of my device, and my desire deep inside of her. I could kiss those passionate red-stained lips forever. “You’ve misinterpreted my intentions, Layla. I will make you submit in all things, princess, especially those that put you in danger, and not just those that you choose.”

Chapter 14

Layla

Dereck stares down at me, those dark watchful eyes, assessing, but he's not waiting for an answer. His intentions were clear, but that doesn't change things unless we can figure out a way to get to my sister another way.

"I like submitting to you, papi." I run my finger over his lip because it's the truth, and I only wish we had met at a different time and place.

Dereck kisses me, tenderly at first, but then finds my tongue, teasing, and leaves me breathless before too long. "Greedy girl," he says, stroking my cheek, but his eyes are full of amusement. "Come on. I'll make some fresh coffee, and we can work on the plan to find your sister before we eat lunch because you're not going back to that club."

He rolls over, and I grimace as I shift to get up.

"Sore?" he asks, concern immediately overshadowing his features.

I shake my head. "Not the bad kind, just a little, umm, full," I say, embarrassed to be talking about the situation I find myself in.

Dereck lifts my chin. "Good. Every time you move, I want you to remember who you've submitted to and that it's my plug in your bottom, and it's me who will take care of you. You can take it out to go to the bathroom anytime you need to, but otherwise, you'll wear it until I remove it," he says, kissing me on the lips.

I nod because it's all I can manage through the haze of emotion that envelopes me. I've dreamed about a relationship like this for so long that it doesn't feel real.

"Let's wash off, princess," Dereck says, taking my hand and leading me into the shower for a quick rinse.

* * *

We're freshly showered, dressed, and have just entered the dining room when Dereck's cell buzzes.

"I can make the coffee," I tell him, gesturing for him to answer his phone.

He nods and accepts the call while I busy myself searching for the items to prepare the machine while he slides into the dining room chair behind his open laptop.

"Hi, Marenah. No, she's still here with me. We're just getting ready to go through the pictures you sent over. We'll have to get back to you with any that Layla recognizes. Murphy is looking at some of the clubs on the list and trying to match informants in the area, and I've asked him to wrap you into anything they learn," he says, pausing to listen for a few moments.

"Always. Thanks for all the work on this. We'll let you know what we find in a little bit," Dereck says as he disconnects, and I bring his coffee.

I place his coffee in front of him and retrieve my own.

"Thanks, princess. Marenah sent over some pictures of women we're going to need to review. They're all recent, the last two to four weeks, and taken from different jobs and surveillance teams. She's hoping one of them might be your sister."

I take a deep breath, trying my hardest to get my feelings under control. After all this time, it's hard to believe that we may be close to finding Luisa. I slide into the seat beside Dereck, getting settled and trying hard not to get my hopes up too high as he opens the file Marenah's sent.

His gray eyes are watching me intently. "Layla, you're breathing too hard," he says, running his thumb over the pulse of my wrist. "I want you to follow my lead, okay," he says, taking my hand and inhaling deeply.

I breathe in as he did, following his example, and he nods, exhaling a long breath.

I do the same, and he rubs the inside of my palm with the tip of his finger, patiently continuing as we repeat the exercise until I feel calmness finally overtaking my runaway nerves.

Dereck strokes the side of my neck with his fingers, finding my pulse. "Much better. Now, I want you to look at all the pictures carefully. Some are live snaps, and the graphic nature may be upsetting, and others are computer created using different hair and makeup. Our teams believe the traffickers are changing the girls' looks as they move them around the city," he tells me,

flipping from picture to picture as I search through the images.

A couple of hours and what seems like thousands of pictures later, I sigh heavily, thoroughly discouraged. All those girls and not one photo is my sister or anyone who looks remotely like Luisa.

Dereck stands and stretches, glancing at his watch and holding his hand out to me. "It's almost noon. Let's take a break from this for a while. Why don't you change into your gym clothes? We could both use a release."

I smile up at him because I thought we had a pretty good release this morning.

His lips turn up in a smile. "A different type of release, princess. The owners of the penthouse set us up with an extremely nice gym. It's pretty impressive, so you should find anything of your liking in it," Dereck says.

"They have a pole, papi?" I ask, giving him a wink.

His brow knits. "That they don't. We may have to improvise or stick to something more mainstream," he says, turning from me to head into the back bedroom.

I follow behind. "You know I was joking."

He nods but still doesn't turn from the bag he's rummaging through in the closet.

I grab my gym bag and head for the bathroom, trying to shake the feeling that he went quiet for a reason. The day I accepted my first part-time job as a topless dancer, it was a given that people would judge me, that I wouldn't be the person they used to see or wanted me to be. I'm not sure what he wants me to say or do, but if he's looking for an apology, he'll get one as soon as hell freezes over. I will do whatever it takes to find my sister, and if he doesn't know that yet, I haven't been clear.

When I return, he's left the bedroom. I walk through the dining room, and he's not there either. I find the gym he referenced at the end of the hall. The room is spacious with an astronomical view of the city and a ton of cardio machines and free weights, but Dereck is nowhere in sight. "Looking for me, princess?"

I start, turning to find him right behind me. "You're so quiet. I was looking all over for you. Where were you?"

He laughs. "I had to reset all the alarms in the security room and run some checks. I changed my mind about staying here to work out. We've been here all morning. Let's go out for a while. We can use the martial arts center where I instruct, and then we can have a late lunch out. It's a short drive from

here,” Dereck says.

“I don’t know. Maybe we should stay in.” I’m far from shy, but talking about things in my ass is a new kind of intimacy, and I find myself entirely at a loss.

He turns and looks at me, questioning. “You don’t want to go out, princess?”

My cheeks heat. “Umm, the plug. It’s still in,” I say, fervently trying not to look away from those dark gray eyes which are always assessing.

Dereck breaks into a big smile, looking down at me, and then he draws me so close I can smell the fresh scent of soap from his shower. “It’s going to stay there as a constant reminder of who you belong to and what I intend to do to you once properly trained with my toys,” he says, rubbing my nose with his.

I draw in a breath, and my center tightens. “Well, I guess there’s a first time for this and everything. Let me grab my purse and stuff,” I say, heading to the back of the condo to retrieve the stuff that has become a necessity to carry close in hand wherever I go.

Dereck is disconnecting from a call when I return. “Ready?”

He smiles, and his jaw tilts to the side. “After you, princess,” he says, reaching me and guiding me to the elevator that takes us to the entrance level.

Ramon is standing by a sporty black car with a sleek pinstripe of silver through the center when we go outside. “My girl loves this ride,” he says, grinning broadly at Dereck, who takes the keys he holds out.

“Ramon, one of these days, if you keep your mind on those school books and work hard, I have no doubt you’ll be driving one of your own. In the meantime, I’m glad you enjoyed the ride,” he says to the young man as he assists me into the car.

“Yeah, when I make it big, Ima get me a Lamborghini Huracán too!”

Dereck laughs. “You know what, Ramon? I do not doubt that you will if you put your mind to it.”

“You have a nice way with him, papi,” I say as Dereck slides into the seat beside me.

“Ramon is a good kid but had a rough start in life. I’m hoping things change for him soon. He’s been given the opportunity now. What he does with it will be completely up to him,” Dereck says, heading out of the circular drive and stopping for the sign at the bottom of the hill.

He drives with precision and skill, navigating the traffic with ease. He

hits the highway and lays into the gas, showing me precisely what he and this magnificent car can do as he moves through the lanes of traffic.

“Holy shit, papi. You gonna let me drive your ride?”

He grins widely. “We’ll see,” he says, slowing down as we get to the ramp that takes us into the inner city traffic.

“You know I can drive!”

“That I do, princess. Here we are,” he says, pulling into the parking lot of a large white building. “We’re on the backside, but it’s a center for martial arts. I instruct a few times a week when I’m in town and work out afterward. I’ll show you around,” he says, taking my hand and leading me up the stairs and through the white double doors of the facility.

We enter a long wood-floored hallway and pass multiple glass-windowed offices along the way until we reach another set of large double doors at the end of the corridor. “This is where I’ll be when you’re finished with your workout,” Dereck says, opening the door so I can look into the room. There are only a handful of men, and two of them are in what looks like white karate suits, facing each other and appearing ready to fight.

“You’re going to do a karate workout?”

He smiles, pulls me in for a kiss, and strokes my cheek. “I instruct and practice Judo, princess, among other techniques, but that’s the main focus on the floor today,” he says, closing the door.

“You gonna teach me some moves, papi?” I sass.

He grins and rubs my nose with his before taking my hand to lead me down a different hall and to another set of double doors.

He opens one side, and I gasp, taking in the room with a quick scan. “Dereck, you didn’t say a word! It’s perfect! Beyond that even!” I say, walking swiftly past him and into the large room entirely walled with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. There are dance bars around the perimeter, and in the very center of the room stands a perfect silver pole that extends from the hardwood floor and to the ceiling.

I turn back and find him watching me with those intent gray eyes. I go to him and tiptoe, pulling his face toward me. “Thank you, Dereck. It didn’t please you that I wanted to dance with a pole, but you brought me here anyway. What a wonderful surprise.”

He taps my nose with a finger. “Correction. It doesn’t please me that you’re still contemplating turning the heads of people who would do you harm if they knew the reason, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t dance. I’ll

leave you to your workout, Princess. Find me when you're done," Dereck says before turning and heading back to the main gym.

I get my little bluetooth speaker out and start my playlist, letting the sultry tones of Ruelle flow around me like only she can do. My routine always begins with a stretch, and this time I have ballet barres and put them to fair use, stretching my legs, arms, and back, working through the various positions as Ruelle seduces the audience with her sultry tones. It takes effort not to focus or become rigid with the plug in place, but I focus my energy on the music, and a half-hour into my routine, my body has grown accustomed to the toy, and it adds to the physical satisfaction of the dance.

When I'm thoroughly warmed, I test my strength on the pole, moving from one lift to another. When I'm done, I try it again, putting the steps and moves together, switching outpacing, strides, and lifts to create a more fluid routine. The sequence works better than I dreamed, and the thought of having just created something new and different excites me beyond belief.

I take out my earpieces and engage the bluetooth to the speakers in the room, running the routine from start to finish, ending in my signature splits with a flip across the floor and a bow to the audience.

There's clapping at the door. I glance up to find Dereck standing in the doorway, looking hotter than hell in one of the white suits I saw on the men in the room he showed me.

"That was incredible, hot and sexy, Layla. Where did you learn that routine? It's different than the one you performed at the club."

I feel my cheeks heat from his praise. "I just created it, just now, in this very room. It's been in my head for a few weeks now. I've been taking one lift and placing it with another one, completely taking apart the routine I've been doing to make something fresh and contemporary."

"I'm impressed beyond belief, but hardly surprised. You have a special gift, Layla, and you looked exceptionally graceful. I couldn't even tell that you were wearing my plug, and I was watching to see if I could."

"How do you know I am?" I ask, winking at him.

"Because you want to be with me, so you're not going to lie to me. You know it's not something I like, and you find your pleasure in pleasing people, and I would be more than disappointed if you told me lies."

I nod, another little white lie. I've lost track of how many I've told, but it's the only thing I can do to hide the larger lie that he can never learn.

Chapter 15

Dereck

Layla has gone quiet. She is such a passionate and expressive woman that it's written all over her lovely features when she lies to me. She needs time to trust me. I'll not make lying comfortable or enable the behavior, but for now, because there is much for me to learn about what she hides, I'll allow it until I no longer do.

I hold out my hand. "Grab your bag, Layla. At some point, we're going to settle up for all the lies you've told, but for now, I'll show you to the showers, and then we can get something to eat. I've worked up an appetite."

She nods, still reserved, still contemplating her lie, and hopefully, it sits uncomfortably with her until she is ready to confide in me.

I take her hand, guide her to the women's locker room, and let her in with my key. "I'll be back for you shortly, say twenty minutes?" I ask.

Layla glances down at her watch and nods. I lift her chin, so she has no choice but to look into my eyes. "I'm not exactly sure why you've gone all quiet, but reflection is good for the soul. It will help you sort through whatever you're contemplating, and when you're ready to share it with me, I'll be here," I tell her before leaving her to ponder my words.

I shower in a few minutes, get dressed, and then find Ian, who was in the middle of a session when I went to see Layla. He's talking with his sparring partner but rushes toward me when they finish. "Hi, Dereck."

"Hi. I heard you got into the competition at the end of the month. Congratulations. That's a huge accomplishment, Ian."

His eyes light up with excitement and pride. "Do you think you can make it?" he asks.

"I wouldn't miss seeing you compete for anything. It was on my calendar

the moment I heard you placed,” I tell him. “Will your parents come?”

He shrugs, and the ugliness of his home life casts its shadow over his young features. “I don’t know, but I asked them both.”

“Good. Encourage them now and then, tell them what it would mean to you, and be truthful. That’s all you can do,” I tell Ian, knowing his parents are not supportive or proud of any of his extracurricular activities or much else aside from their addiction.

“I’ll do that,” he says, and I know he will.

“I’ll be back Sunday afternoon for a workout. If you’re around, we can get some sparring time in, a little prep for your competition.”

“Are you kidding? That would be awesome!”

I laugh at his exuberance. “I’ll be here around one and see you then,” I tell him, heading toward the ladies' locker room to pick up Layla.

When I reach the room, she still hasn’t come out. I rap on the door. “Time’s up, princess. I’m sure you look beautiful. I’m hungry,” I say, having worn off the breakfast croissant hours ago, after expending my energy with Layla.

I decide that we should have a little fun while teaching Layla that she should not keep me waiting when I ask her to do something. I smile as my thoughts head south with the idea of giving my little submissive a lesson she won't soon forget and that we'll both enjoy.

I look down the hall and smile to myself, hoping no one sees me stalking the ladies' shower room. I walk in and make my way around to the sinks and mirrors where I expect to find her primping, but there’s no sign of her—no gym bag, hairdryer, or anything. “Layla?” I call, walking through the dressing and toileting area, glancing into each of the opened stalls with not one sign that she has been here at all.

I call her phone, and it rings and rings and rings, and finally, her voice comes over the line, but it’s her recording telling me to leave a message. I make my way back to the sparring area in case she finished getting ready while I was talking with Ian, already knowing the chances that she finished before I got done talking are highly unlikely.

When I reach the gym, a couple of instructors and two students are left, but there is no sign of Layla. “Did you see a young woman with long dark hair?” I ask, but the tightening in my chest already tells me what I don’t want to accept.

The younger student nods. “I did. She passed me in the hall. She was

heading to the front door. I forgot to plug the parking meter, so I went back out to do that and saw her getting on the city bus,” he says, causing my chest to tighten with something that I’m entirely unaccustomed to feeling.

“Thank you, Kenny. If you see her again, get ahold of me,” I tell him, handing him my instructor business card before heading to my car.

I hit the overhead as I back up to get Murph on the line. “I need some help. I’m looking for Layla. She gave me the slip.”

“Seriously, man? How’d that happen?” he jokes, but I’m in no mood.

“It’s a long story.”

“Are you still trying to get more information from her? I thought you had everything you needed about Bryanna. That job’s going as planned,” Murph says.

“No, it’s for personal reasons.” I’ll deal with his jesting if I need to. I know it’s personal, but Layla’s information could also give Marenah the intel she needs, and she has a vested interest in this particular case for a variety of reasons.

“She was seen getting on a bus right outside the martial arts center,” I tell Murph, listening to his fingers fly over the keyboard in the background.

“How long ago?” he asks.

I glance at the time on the dash. “I’d guess close to half an hour ago, outside thirty minutes.”

“Got it. Hang on; we’re processing right now.”

I take a deep breath because every single minute that Layla’s out of my sight, she gets farther away, which puts her in risk of doing something dangerous without me to back her up.

I head back to the condo while waiting for Murph. It doesn’t take long. “There were only two buses that stopped outside the center during that time. One was heading west, and one was heading south. I have a list of all the stops and will send them to you shortly. In the meantime, I’ll put a flag on her credit card and see if something pops up and put an alert out to the camera guys monitoring the city cams. Still, without a vehicle or something specific to look for, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Murph says.

“Thanks, Murph. Let me know if anything comes up, and I’ll do the same.” Layla had bags with her that she didn’t take with her to the gym. All she had with her was her purse and gym bag, and then I remember her car. I call the Prestian Towers and get Ramon on the line.

“Hey, have you seen the lady I was with earlier?” I ask.

“No, but man, is she fine, Dereck! And that outfit she was wearing last night, hot, man, hot!”

My jaw tightens with annoyance at his boyish exuberance, but it’s not his fault. He has no idea why I’m calling, and I can’t blame him for being wowed by Layla’s looks. “I need a favor. If she calls you to get her car, can you let me know before you give it to her?”

“Sure can.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back to the condo shortly, but in the meantime, the number I’m calling from is where you can reach me.”

“Got it. I’ll keep a watch for your lady,” Ramon says before I disconnect and head for the highway that will take me to the condo the quickest, accelerating faster than usual.

I pull in less than twenty minutes later, and Ramon comes out to greet me. “Hey, Dereck. No sign of your girl,” he says.

I’m about to correct his assessment of our relationship when I realize it would probably be a reasonably close description if I had my way. “Thanks, Ramon. I’ll be upstairs if you see or hear anything. Oh, and can you get the license plate number and any rental information from inside the car she was driving and text it to me, please?” I ask.

“No problem, Dereck,” he says, as I hand him a hundred dollar bill.

“Whoa, you don’t need to give me this. I’d help you with anything,” Ramon says. I know he suspects I was the anonymous donor who made his college education possible, but I haven’t volunteered the information, and he hasn’t asked, and for now, I’d like to keep it that way.

“Consider it a tip,” I call, passing the bellman on the way to the private elevators of the penthouse where I intend to find out if my spirited beauty planned this before she left or if it was an impulsive decision on her part.

I open the door to the bedroom I gave her when we arrived, and her overnight bag is still on the floor. I unzip it and rummage through the contents, pulling out a ziplock bag of what appears to be a passport and other legal documents. I open the bag and take out one of three small blue folders, opening it to the first page and looking into the eyes of the woman I’ve come to consider mine. I glance at the name and scowl, opening the next passport only to find the same woman but with blonde hair and a different name. In the third passport, the picture shows her with short red hair and yet another name. I suck in a breath. I knew she had secrets, but I certainly wasn’t expecting this.

Something had to have happened. Layla wouldn't have run and left her passports, which reassures me that she plans to return. Just maybe not today. I don't know how many changes of clothes she had in her bag before, but it doesn't appear as though Layla took much as it's filled to the brim with high-heeled shoes.

I head into the kitchen, make a sandwich, grab a bottle of water, and sign onto my laptop to get the list Murph sent.

It doesn't take long, eating as I work, beginning with the list of stops the bus heading south has made. I filter all the bars in the area and then search to narrow down the bars' owners, searching for one owned by Sammy, but nothing stands out from the southbound stops. I already know it's going to take more time to go through the west side list because not only are there four times as many, but many of the ones affiliated with Bernatelli are all within walking distance for a person as fit as Layla.

As soon as I get the list narrowed, I map out all the other bar locations that Marenah has sent for reference. It's hard to say where Layla's going to start looking for her sister, but instinct tells me that my relentless princess isn't going to wait until tonight to do something to find her. It's an hour later when Murph calls back with no news on the credit card search, but he can confirm the bar I've found is the right one. The one I now know Layla will be dancing at tomorrow night if I don't find her sister before then, but that doesn't help me a damn bit right now.

I settle in, calling every hotel in a two-mile radius of Sammy's bar because she has to have gone somewhere to stay the night. She hasn't checked in at any of the hotels, so I extend my search to three miles, then to four, and then to five, but not one of them has a registration for Layla. I pull all the pieces of the elaborate plan together on the table, reviewing the information gathered last evening and what I intended to go over with Layla and for us to finalize together, sending one message after another, and getting everything organized for tomorrow night.

The plan is finally in place, right down to the finest of detail. The team members helping with the operation have been briefed and prepared for tomorrow night. We have a detailed plan for any logical scenario that may present itself. I stand and stretch, glancing at the time. She's completely capable of taking care of herself, but that doesn't stop me from worrying, thinking about what she's doing, or wanting her to be here with me instead.

I walk over to the glass wall overlooking the lights below. *Where are you,*

princess? I know she could be anywhere in this sprawling city, and the chance of locating her if she doesn't want to be found is doubtful. I start calling all the hotels again, one by one, until I finally receive confirmation that Layla has checked into one of the west side hotels. I throw on an overshirt, grab my gear, and am halfway out the door when my cell phone rings.

I absently pull it from my pocket and answer.

"It's Layla." Her voice is quiet, barely above a whisper.

My chest tightens at the softness of her voice. "Are you okay, princess?"

She stifles a sob on the other end. "I'm not hurt if that's what you mean, but I'm not okay either."

"Where are you? Safe?"

"I'm safe and at a hotel not that far away. I'm curled up in bed for the night and felt like talking."

"You left on your own? Tell me why, Layla?"

There's silence on the other end of the phone. I'm known for my patience, but not knowing what's wrong with Layla tests it like nothing ever has before. I breathe in deeply. She's okay, she said she's okay, and I need to give her the time she needs. Layla called me, and she'll tell me when she's ready and not before. I know that much about my spirited beauty, but I find the wait agonizing, which only further solidifies how much she has come to mean to me in such a short time.

"Are you still there, Dereck?"

"I'm still here, princess," I say, walking back into the condo and stretching out on the sofa.

"I lied to you, not just once, but twice; maybe even three times."

Her answer is the first time I've smiled since seeing her last. "You left because you lied to me, princess?"

There's a brief pause, but I don't need to coax her response further. She clears her throat and tells me exactly what I want to hear. "Yes."

The fact that she's upset because she lied is pleasing to me on so many different levels. "Lying to me bothered you, Layla?"

"Yes, very much."

She's not giving me her defensive attitude this time. I'm going to hear what's on her mind. "Tell me what you can then. I'm listening, princess."

Her voice catches, but she doesn't let that stop her. "I don't want to lie to you anymore, Dereck. You don't deserve that, or to be saddled with someone

like me who has a shit ton of baggage and lies right to your face, time and time again after you did everything you could to help me.”

I smirk. My little submissive has a special knack for skirting right around the question, answering only the parts she wants to reply to and disregarding those she wants to avoid. “Layla, you may be sorry for lying, and that pleases me, but that’s not the entire reason why you left. I want to know why and for you to tell me.”

“That’s the dilemma. One of the people at your martial arts center knows me personally. I didn’t want him to see or recognize me, so I got out of there pretty quick.”

“I’ve told you how I feel about half-truths, princess, and I can assure you that your ass cheeks won’t like the consequence if you don’t tell me what spooked you.”

“He’s an old friend. It’s complicated, but it would blow my entire plan if he recognized me at the center. Please, don’t push for more than I can share. Just trust that I had to leave, didn’t want you to worry, and that I miss you. I suck at this submissive stuff, but I really don’t want to mess up what we have. It means something to me,” Layla says.

I contemplate every word she’s said, and as much as I dislike the fact that another man caused her to flee and that she doesn’t feel she can trust me with this information, we’ve barely gotten to know each other. She’s been upfront and honest about not allowing anything to stand in the way of finding her sister, but not about herself, evidenced by the three different passports I saw in her bag. I draw on my patience, which is usually in ready supply, already instinctively knowing her intentions are good, relieved Layla is safe and felt comfortable enough to share her feelings about our developing relationship.

“I know it does, princess. You forget I was the one watching the pulse on the side of your neck quicken when your desire grew. Your eyes dilate and turn hazy with need, and not just in the bedroom, Layla. It’s the dynamic we share. The connection between a dominant and submissive, and ours is exceptionally magnetic and powerful. It draws you in and holds you firm to each other, regardless of what tries to pull it apart, even trust. All you had to do was pull me to the side at the center and tell me exactly what you’ve shared with me tonight, and we could have avoided this entire situation. I may have pushed a little for answers, but I would have accepted your explanation; instead, you lied. Do you know what the consequences are for lying to me? Do you know what the punishment will be when you learn to

trust me and return to me, princess?”

Her voice squeaks as she responds, “No.”

“I think now is as good a time as any to go over my rules, to discuss any hard or soft limits you may have, talk specifically about the consequences of your actions, and find out what fully submitting to me in the future would entail. Are you ready, princess?”

Chapter 16

Layla

I don't know how Dereck has come to mean so much to me. It wasn't the plan, not part of any of it. He just kept showing up, helping me, and breaking through all my defenses, making it impossible to push aside the submissive desires craving to be free. The professional side of me, the one that understands what's coming and what I have to do to find my sister, knows this whirlwind relationship may very well end tomorrow, while the soft submissive side of me needs to make sure he realizes just how much I care. We may need to go our separate ways after all that I have planned, but his question only serves to ignite my need into a full-blown fire tonight. "Yes."

I can envision his gray eyes, dark and watchful, assessing my emotions, the ones he likes to see when I would rather hide. "What are you wearing, Layla?" Dereck asks, and just the sound of his deep voice causes my center to clench.

"A tank top and a pair of panties."

"The clothes you brought to the gym to change into?"

"Yes, I didn't plan to leave, if that's what you were going to ask. It just happened. I don't have much with me."

"I deduced that much when I found your bag lying in the guest room," he says, pausing, giving me yet another chance to explain what he's obviously found. When I don't, he doesn't call me on it but continues. "What color are your panties, Layla? Describe them to me, princess?"

I close my eyes, inhaling, and enveloping myself with that husky voice that wraps around me like a seductive blanket. "White, with a red bow in the center, high cut."

"Sexy. What else are you wearing, Layla?"

I know what he means, but I avoid the question. “No bra, nothing else.”
“What happened to your plug, princess?”

I inhale, my center wetting as he talks to me. “I took it out to go to the bathroom and shower.”

“And you didn’t put it back?”

I pause. “No,” I say, so quietly that I can barely hear it myself.

“I see. If you submit to me, the next time I place my plug inside of you, it will stay there until you have permission to remove it, but for now, we’ll leave it out since we have more to discuss before we determine the course,” Dereck says, making my chest tighten with the thought that after all I’ve done, he may be trying to determine if we are even compatible. Maybe after he goes over his rules, it won’t be a matter of me being able to stay or not wanting to submit. Perhaps I was right, and I do come with too much baggage, too much drama and trouble, and he’ll find through this conversation that we just aren’t going to be compatible in anything except the bedroom.

“**Rule one.** We’ve already discussed it at length. No lying. Small white lies and avoidance all constitute that behavior to me. You’ve managed to break this rule not only once, but multiple times. Trust takes time, and with that, I do not doubt that given time, you’ll tell me the truth from now on. That doesn’t mean that I won’t administer a consequence because I told you up front that I would, and I am a man of my word. I was waiting for you to trust me a little more before we delved too far into punishments. Would you like to know what that is now or after you hear all the rules?”

“All the rules, then the consequence.”

“**Rule two.** You’ll defer to me on all things related to your protection. There will be safety specific rules that you may or may not like, but they will be for your protection, especially since we know that R.J. and his goons will be looking for you if for no other reason than him wishing to flex his muscles. These include letting me know where you would like to go and making arrangements to keep you secure. It does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, you disappear without a word, not letting anyone know where you plan to be, or that you are safe. I will never be talking to you on the phone without knowing exactly where you are and that the establishment you’re in has been cleared and is fully guarded. I hope I’ve made myself clear on this because there is no room for negotiating this or any of my rules.”

There’s a brief pause, but he doesn’t ask me a question, and before I start

to fill the silence, he continues.

“Rule three. You should expect to live in your skin adorned with trinkets of my choosing the majority of the time when at home. Rarely anything else.

“Rule four. We don’t need to spend a great deal of time on health as you take excellent care of your physical body. Still, it would be remiss not to ensure you know the parameters include regular preventative checkups, medical and dental, balanced nutrition, and exercise.

“Rule five. My tendencies as a dominant do not lean toward sadism. While consequences will occur for infractions of the rules, they will not be of the harsh variety. Although intended to correct behavior, and make no mistake they will do that, they will not be severe or come as a surprise. We will discuss them at length later, but before you agree to submit, you will have an opportunity to talk over any hard limits you have before deciding. If we experiment with something, a new punishment or scene, and you ask me to stop, I will. We can identify safe words if you like, but as I said, if you say stop, I stop. In all things of this nature, your well-being and safety will be my utmost concern. I won’t ever take it lightly or for granted if you put your trust in me.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize that I had been holding until now.

“Any questions so far, Layla?”

“You explained them pretty well. Do you enjoy punishing your submissives?”

“I don’t especially derive enjoyment from that, Layla. I’m not looking for someone who acts out to get that particular reaction from her dominant, but if done right, the consequence can be effective and arousing for both parties.”

“I like the sound of that,” I tell him, barely able to get the words out through the emotion that’s causing my voice to crack.

“I’m glad to hear that, princess. Ready to continue?”

“Yes.”

“Rule Six. This particular rule has taken me considerable time to determine. I don’t want to stifle your creativity, especially after seeing how much you love the dance and how incredibly talented you are at creating and executing it, but I am not interested in having my submissive display her body to anyone but me.”

I breathe in deep because this is the place he can’t go, but he’s not even pausing, already barrelling headfirst right over the barrier. “I realize your profession is important and that you may need time to contemplate the

options, but let me assure you I've given a great deal of thought to other alternatives for your consideration. You can open a studio, teach, do whatever it is in the dance world that you want, except taking your clothes off for other men. I've given this a lot of thought, Layla, and it's non-negotiable for me."

I wipe the tear that has slowly begun to trickle down my face, and then the next, but the tears by now have gathered, falling too fast to keep up. I was hoping Dereck's rules wouldn't rip me away from my goal, wouldn't prohibit the one thing I'm unable to walk away from, at least until I find my sister, but they did. His rule leaves no room for negotiation, and there's simply nothing left to say. The persona that has always managed to conceal my emotions, kept people from seeing the real me, and kept my heart protected slips silently into place. "Sorry to hear that, papi, because that rule is a deal-breaker for me."

Chapter 17

Dereck

I glance at the silent phone in my hand, the one disconnected by the fiery beauty who was on the other end of the line one minute and just as quickly now gone. A deal-breaker. Having to quit dancing topless is a deal-breaker for Layla. A hard limit, and I hadn't even thought of her not wanting to give it up. I knew introducing the subject of not dancing would be a no go, and I would never want, or ask, her to give that up. I thought she would welcome an opportunity to dance without having to undress after finding her sister.

I ring her back, but there's no answer, and the call eventually goes to voicemail. "Layla, this is Dereck. Call me back, princess. We need to discuss the dancing and the rules about hanging up on me in the middle of a conversation."

A message pops up on my cell almost immediately.

Message: There's nothing to discuss, papi.

I'll give her time and space to deal with her feelings, but not without protection. I expected her to be using an alias when I called the hotels since she chose not to use her credit card, assuming she didn't want to be tracked. But she's registered as Layla Contreras, confirming that nothing adds up where Layla is concerned.

I call Trent and Liam, and we rearrange schedules to make sure there's a team outside the hotel to keep an eye out for anything suspicious overnight and keep her safe in case R.J. has managed to track her down too. I've just gathered up the plans for tomorrow and am signing onto a conference call with the team working on the Bryanna case when I get the confirmation text. A group of four men is in place at the hotel to safeguard Layla for the night.

It's late by the time we end, and there still hasn't been a call from Layla.

Sleep does not come easy. I've always prided myself on fairness and the ability to consider other people's feelings. While having Layla continue to dance was never an issue, having her do it nude is not something I will allow if she's going to be mine. The problem is, I've already begun thinking about the fiery beauty as mine. I find her not returning my call completely unacceptable, but that attitude came about quickly, way too fast. Something else is going on. Layla tends to cop an attitude when she's on the defensive. *What are you hiding, my fiery little submissive?* Whatever it is, I fully intend to learn her secrets, even if it takes busting through every defense mechanism she throws my way, in order to get through.

* * *

The next day, it's almost five in the afternoon before I hear from the guards that Layla is on the move. She's laid low, had room service delivered to her room twice, once for breakfast and then a late lunch, but otherwise had no physical contact with anyone else all day. She's not heading to the west side club because the real shows don't start until after eight o'clock tonight. I have a team she won't recognize discreetly follow her while Trent, Liam, and I work on getting things in place and set up without being recognized around the small club before Layla arrives.

It's obvious Layla fully intends to use the club and her exceptional dancing skills to get close to Sammy and Bernatelli. Anywhere that Bernatelli is, he's sure to have his underboss with him, along with an army of soldiers to do his bidding, so being prepared is essential. If I could stop this and know that my fiery beauty wouldn't just try a different way again, I would. But that's not Layla's style. She's just going to keep going, doing what she believes she needs to do to find her sister until we do. At least she won't be in the limelight long. A few minutes is longer than I would like, but the plan we've developed will assure she's secured quickly and that we get her out of the situation before anyone is the wiser.

The guards check in an hour later to let me know Layla is at an adult costume shop and is buying lingerie. Even though I know Layla fully intends to dance for the fuckers at the bar, my jaw tightens, regardless of how I feel about the situation. I contemplate stopping her, but this is something she needs to do herself. I need to find out exactly why she has different aliases

because nothing about that in our line of business is good.

I'll give her space to figure out her future, but I won't allow harm to come to the woman who can't seem to keep herself out of trouble and who has managed to consume my thoughts since the very first time I saw her. It's much later when I get a text to let me know she's heading to the club, and that's my cue to head back there myself.

I give her time, knowing she's safe and secure with my team and all the bugs we've put in place in preparation for tonight, before I walk in. It's just about showtime and impossible to miss Layla. She's at the bar chatting up the bartender, toying with a mixed drink, and wearing an impossibly short black skirt and a low cut red and black halter that leave the strings of her bikini top beneath in full view.

My jaw tenses as that unfamiliar feeling of possession tightens around me. I've been in plenty of relationships, but not once has the magnetism been this forceful, this primal, and this fucking intense.

Layla and the bartender are still talking when a man in a black suit walks in from the back. I recognize Sam Mahoney, Sammy to his friends, and the club's manager, from my research. According to the records sent over, he's trying to make a name for himself with Chicago's boss and doing a pretty decent job, at least financially. This bar brings in much more revenue with less expense than R.J.'s club, at least on the report Murph sent over. I have a feeling that Porsche and the way R.J. lives may have something to do with it, but if he's skimming from the boss, Bernatelli will find out at some point, and his day of reckoning will come. No one takes from Bernatelli and lives to tell about it, at least from what I know about the man.

The man himself walks in at that moment, strolling through the bar, then shaking Sammy's hand, who's standing behind the bar. Layla takes that moment to stand, and the manager can't keep his eyes from scanning down the expanse of her body while Bernatelli's eyes follow his gaze. She gives them both a big smile and sends a wink Sammy's way, intentionally ignoring the boss.

He follows her sway as she makes her way to the women's restroom, and once the door closes behind her, he turns to talk to Sammy. When she returns, Sammy gestures her over, and Layla saunters to the barstool she was sitting on before, taking her time, settling into the seat, and crossing her long sexy legs to ensure she's captured their full attention.

Both men are entirely captivated. Layla nods as they talk to her, keeping

her smiles and laughs focused on Sammy, even when Bernatelli speaks directly to her. It takes a few intentional snubs, but by the time my princess has ignored him for the third time, Bernatelli's jaw tightens with unconstrained irritation.

As annoyed as I am watching her flirt with the two, I can't help admire her beauty, poise, and skill, but when Sammy leans in close, my jaw tightens at the intimacy, knowing his intent. He speaks directly to her. Layla flounces her hair to one shoulder, paying him extra attention, and causing Bernatelli to simmer in the background, never taking his eyes from my fiery and spirited dark-haired beauty.

When Sammy's finished talking, she shrugs, seemingly disinterested, which sparks Bernatelli into action. He reaches in front of Sammy, places a single bill on the bar directly in front of her, and says one word that I can make out from here. *Dance!*

Layla looks at him and then glances over at Sammy, who's fixedly watching the exchange. She gives Sammy a lingering, sensual look and then shifts her long wavy hair before making her way slowly up the stairs to the stage. Layla seductively walks toward the man running the music in the corner. She says something I'm unable to make out, but his smile is immediate, and he nods with enthusiasm as she parts the curtain and heads backstage.

I take a drink and watch as Sammy and Bernatelli make their way to a table by the stage and sit down, just as the overhead lights dim. The sultry tones of the song Layla danced to at the martial arts center begin to play from the room's corner speakers, right before the curtain slowly parts, unveiling my half-dressed submissive who is being anything but compliant at the moment.

Everyone in the audience feels the anticipation of the moment as she takes center stage. Layla's sporting her signature bright red G-string, which I happen to know was a purchase at the adult shop she visited earlier, along with the rest of her costume.

Layla sways to the music, making her way around the perimeter of the stage, getting to know the crowd, pulling in their interest, tossing them smiles and waves of her flouncy hair, and intentionally not making eye contact with me. She stops midstroll and sends a wink in Sammy's direction. I see Bernatelli's jaw clench, and his hand tightens around the glass the waitress has brought him as Layla intentionally ignores him, dancing away from their

table while continuing to toy with the crowd. My princess teases the group so sinfully, making us wait with just the right amount of anticipation. She lowers her sensually clad body to the floor, intimately engaging us in a dance between her and the hardwood she lies on, leaving every red-blooded man in the room panting and wanting more. Layla takes her time, working the crowd up, writhing on the floor some more before slowly arching her body into the pose I've seen before, giving the audience a very intimate view of her G-string decorated and upended ass.

Layla isn't in a hurry. She intends to tease, keeping us engrossed with her dance as she touches the delicate strings of her bikini top, teasing and tormenting us while making her way to the pole. The room has gone completely quiet because everyone in this room knows what will eventually come, and the stillness in the air can measure the anticipation and arousal she draws from the crowd.

Layla slowly spins around the silver rod in the center of the stage. She is a fiery vision in her skimpy outfit and five-inch heels as she toys with the pole and every man in the room.

Layla loses herself in the music, teasing as she lifts herself onto the pole, holding a pose, stretched high in the air and guiding herself with her calves and ankles, which are wrapped seductively around the pole's shiny thin circumference. She is absorbed with the tune and slides around the pole, gracefully displaying her lithe body for the crowd, teasing us with each tantalizing move she makes before landing on the floor.

She starts the tease working towards the big reveal, the one the crowd of men has been dying for, caressing the side of her G-string panties before spinning around and around and around. Layla has us enthralled, wondering when her top will come off, and everyone waits with an aroused breath. And this time, she gives the bright red string a tug displaying her perfect breasts to every horny man in the room, including myself.

When she returns to the pole, she changes her routine to the one she created, a masterfully orchestrated dance that displays her grace, strength, and every facet of her amazingly perfect body. She hangs in the air, giving the room a wide, bright smile, holding herself upright with the strength of her arms and a dainty ankle wrapped seductively around the silver rod. Layla winds down with a slow and seductive finish, keeping us all on edge, twirling in the air, and fascinating us with her strength and agility. She flips from the pole, landing perfectly, which sends the audience into a loud frenzy before

taking a bow and parading ever indecently from the stage and out of my sight.

As if on cue, Bernatelli leans over and says something to Sammy, which causes his hand to tighten around the glass of whiskey he's drinking, but his face remains passive as he listens to his boss.

Bernatelli stands and heads to the back. I engage the camera and audio on my phone as he walks through the door that leads him down a short hall to the girls' dressing room. He doesn't knock, just barges through the door. Layla starts and spins to face him at the sound of the intrusion. She's by herself, and, fortunate for Bernatelli, she's already pulled on a tank top, covering herself from his view.

"Going forward, you'll dance here on the weekends and keep my bed warm after your shows. You'll move into an apartment that I keep. Now isn't that better than the deal you discussed with Sammy?"

"So much better. You sure do know how to treat a girl, Mr. Bernatelli," Layla purrs.

Chapter 18

Dereck

Every muscle in my body tightens, listening to this exchange. Layla has the kingpin of Chicago wrapped around her dainty little finger. I know precisely why Layla is trying to get close to the man, coaxing him to confide in her or let something slip that would help find her sister, but that doesn't ease my annoyance to any degree. I'll let this play out as long as she's safe, but Layla can bet her sweet little ass that it won't be for long because she is mine, and I do not share.

Bernatelli moves closer, and Layla backs away, causing me to smile for the first time since I got to the club. "A couple of things we still need to talk about if we're looking for exclusivity," she says.

His eyes darken, and my entire body tenses knowing I'm at least three minutes from that fucking room if things go south. I scan the bar, taking in the guards who've come out from the back to watch the newest girl on the stage take it all off. I give my teammate across the room a nod, letting him know without words to get ready. With one wrong word Bernatelli, he'll find himself surrounded by me and my entire team, and they've already been to the mats with this son of a bitch before.

"I'll forgive you, this one time, sweetheart, but see, around this club and every one of the clubs on the west side, I call the shots, including our arrangement. Is that clear?" Bernatelli says, reaching out a hand and grabbing a handful of hair before pulling her to him.

My fist clenches with the need to do something, and it takes every bit of the willpower I have to hold back, see where this is going, and what she has planned before I intercede.

"Easy! I was just going to ask for a little time during the day to do a few

things, you know, things a girl likes to do to please her man. I like to be baby smooth when I dance and play, and you know, nails, and well, that's all I was going to ask. I thought you might have a place you send your special girls that I might be able to go to without spending a fortune," Layla says, batting her long made-up eyelashes.

Bernatelli smiles widely. "I like your style, Layla. Calculating, greedy, and straight to the point, but gorgeous as fuck. Consider it done. I'll have someone brought around to pick you up and take you to the salon tomorrow. In the meantime, why don't you get that pretty little ass ready for the late crowd, and then you can show me how much you appreciate my generosity later."

Layla runs her finger down his cheek and trails his lips, causing my jaw to tighten. "That all sounds fine, but what should I tell Sammy?" she says, pretending to pout.

"Sammy works for me, not the other way around. I'll smooth the way, and you'll have top billing from now on during the weekends. I might need to send you over to one of my clubs farther south to get that place livened up and back to running in the black. I sent the manager of that shithole over an invitation to come see you dance tonight and to see how real talent draws in a crowd like nothing else."

I'm reasonably sure whatever her plan is, it didn't include R.J. showing up here. It's pretty clear that although she's seen Bernatelli lurking around the clubs, he hasn't recognized her as I at first feared, but R.J. is a different story altogether. The minute he sees her, the game will be over, and she knows it as well as I do.

"I need to meet with Sammy. I'll take you to your apartment when you're finished dancing, and you can thank me properly," Bernatelli says to Layla, but there's not a chance in fuck that's happening.

"Are you going to watch me dance?"

"I'll be watching alright, sweetheart," he says, turning and making his way to the door.

I'm watching Bernatelli's back through the screen of my phone, and as his hand reaches the door handle, I hear the unquestionable click of a revolver. My eyes revert to Layla and to the gun she now has pointed at the mafia boss' back.

"We're going to walk out this door, take a right, and go out through the back door. Any of your goons make one move, and you're dead. Let's move,

asshole.”

Son of a bitch. My fiery princess just put a gun to the kingpin of Chicago’s back and plans to take him hostage from one of his establishments point-blank. I nod to Liam across the room, who has his earbuds in and knows exactly what’s going down. As casually as we can, we both head for the doors on either side of the stage. The guards who should be back in the hall, protecting their boss, are out here ogling the lady on stage, but as engrossed in her as they are, they’re not about to let just anyone through those doors to the employee area without reason.

This situation just went from bad to worse in less than three minutes flat. We need to force the guards to let us through, which will mean endangering Layla further, or we can play it cool, wait for her to get Bernatelli outside, and catch up with them there. I shake my head to Liam, letting him know to hold back.

The burly guy who’s irritated beyond belief at having his show interrupted glares at me. “Sorry, man. I need to hit the head.”

He narrows his eyes at me and gestures to the other side of the room. “See that big ass sign over that door? It says restrooms,” he growls before turning back to watch the blonde woman on the stage who’s getting ready for the big reveal.

I turn, heading toward the bathroom, and then veer right, heading straight out the front door. I race around the corner just in time to see Layla peeling out of the lot with a slumped over Bernatelli leaning against the passenger side window. It’s way too late to catch her on foot. I barely have time to see the plates and snap a quick picture before rocks spray all over the place as she flies off the dirt road and onto the pavement that will take her to the highway.

“Son of a bitch!” How the hell can everything so carefully planned go straight to hell in a matter of minutes? In less than two minutes, she would have been safe, and Bernatelli would have been ours!

Trent meets up with me, coming from around the other side of the bar. “Damn, that woman can drive!”

“Uh-huh,” I say, beelining it to my car with him hot on my heels. Trent jumps into the passenger side, and we’ve almost made it out of the parking lot when the burly goons come barreling around the side of the bar.

I hit the gas. “Get your head down!” I say as we propel through the gravel, skidding just before we hit the pavement and slide onto the blacktop.

I hit the overhead, and Murph comes on. “We’re in pursuit of Layla and

Bernatelli. They're in a black Acura sports car, and my guess is they're heading to the highway." I hand Trent my cell. "The plate numbers are on the camera," I say.

Trent finds the picture I took and rattles them off to Murph while I keep my foot on the floor and head towards the highway.

"Roger that. Hold tight, you guys, while we get into the city mainframe. We saw everything go down through the cameras. Liam was able to get out without being detected and won't be far behind. We can get a good view of the cars coming through in three minutes; make that two," Murph says, clicking away on his keyboard as we wait for the city mainframe to load.

"I'll watch the cars coming through the toll cam, and get one of our guys to go through the loops in case they slipped through already."

"They just left, but just in case, have them look back five minutes. It wasn't more than that," I say, navigating around the traffic that's bunching up to get to the expressway on a Saturday night.

Murph comes back over the speaker. "We've got her. She's heading south, flying like a bat out of hell, and heading straight for a speed trap about four miles down the road. If you can't get to her before she reaches them, she'll get picked up for sure."

"Roger that. I have her in my sights just ahead," I say, disconnecting only to connect with the team behind us. "We need to surround Layla and get her off the road before she hits a speed trap. Put your foot down, and follow me," I tell Liam, who's driving behind me, giving the pedal more gas than it needs to surge ahead and begin closing the distance.

I speed down the middle lane, past the cars in the fast lane with my team on my tail, until I've pulled right up beside Layla. "Get in position behind her, guys. I'll start nudging her over to get her to pull over at the exit coming up," I say as they slip in between her and the car behind her.

I push the auto command to text Layla and wait while the line rings overhead. There's a click on the other end of the line and then nothing but silence, so I call her back.

This time she answers after three rings. "You keep showing up, papi!" she fumes.

"Get off at the next exit. You're going to run right into a speed trap a couple of miles up."

"And if I don't?"

"I don't think you want to discuss the consequences in mixed company,

and you're on speakerphone right now," I say, earning me an ear to ear grin from Trent.

"We can do this the easy or the hard way, princess. I'm asking you nicely—pull off at the next exit."

"Sorry, Dereck, that's not part of the plan, and I can't let you derail me this time."

I disconnect and get the guys behind me on the line. "Go around me and get in front of her, Liam. It looks like we're going to do this the hard way. They step on the gas and move into the far left lane, gunning it around another car before darting across the highway to slide in between her and the car in front of her.

"Hold it steady, right there while I nudge her over," I say, sliding closer to the line.

Layla glances up briefly, and her grip tightens on the wheel, but she has nowhere to go except to stay where she is or pull off at the exit that's coming up fast.

I nudge over again, hovering on the line, crossing over it, just enough to get my point across. Layla hits the steering wheel with an open palm, having invaded her space in the right-hand lane.

I call her back, and she answers on the first ring. "What don't you understand? I need to do this!"

"Perhaps, but you're not doing it this way. Pull over, princess, or you'll force me to do it for you," I say, inching over even more as Liam slows down in front of her just as we almost reach the exit.

"Fine!" she yells, easing off the gas to prevent hitting the car in front of her and turning her wheel to the right to avoid me.

"We've talked about the consequence of using the word fine, and I don't go back on my promises, princess."

Chapter 19

Layla

I veer off the highway and onto the exit, hitting the steering wheel with the palm of my hand. Once again, Dereck's thwarted my plans and left me no goddamn choice in the matter. I drive down the two-lane ramp, pull off onto the shoulder, and glance at Bernatelli, who's still passed out from the drugs I injected him with, and probably will be for quite some time.

I glance in the side mirror, watching as Dereck unfolds his body from the car and stalks toward my vehicle like a panther about to pounce on his prey. Every muscle in that lithe body of his ripples in his jeans and snug-fitting tee. As much as I try to shake it off, having this fine specimen of a man chase me down and catch me is flipping my girlie switch to the point of pure and utter distraction until he yanks open the car door and scowls down at me.

"I knew you were going to try to get their attention, but this? I told you we would put a plan together and get your sister back, yet you take off to do it on your own. You don't talk to me about it, instead decide to disappear, cause me to worry, and then kidnap the kingpin of Chicago? To do what, Layla?"

I don't know what to say, and he doesn't give me a minute to reply. "You know what? Don't even answer that because I wouldn't want you to get yourself into any more trouble than you're already in," Dereck says, still scowling down at me

"I told you that I need to finish this! I need to find her, Dereck, and this is the way. I've tried every other thing I know!"

"Not this way, princess. You're going to be no part of getting the truth from this slimebag. I can assure you of that. Now, be a good girl and get out of the car nicely."

I glare at him. “Oh, I don’t think so, papi. I have to finish what I started!”

Dereck ignores my anger. “This time I won’t say it as nicely. Get out of the car, Layla, or I will pick you up and haul you back to my car. Walking there yourself would look so much more dignified, don’t you agree?”

I toss my hair over my shoulder. “You wouldn’t dare, and besides, your men know jack about my sister or what even to ask!”

“We’ll continue this conversation in my car,” Dereck says, clearly undissuaded as he reaches down to unbuckle me from the seat belt.

He leans in, and all I can smell is Dereck. That masculine scent that makes my center wet with him this near. Damn this man and his sexiness, always trying to throw me off my game. “I’m not going!”

“You’re going alright,” he says, sliding his hands under my legs and around my back. “I’m taking the reins from here. Don’t fight me, princess,” he whispers next to my ear, sending a shiver down the length of my spine.

My hands are free, and I could put up a fight, try valiantly to push him away, but instead, I give up, knowing that I’m going with him wherever he takes me because he’s here and hasn’t given up on me, time after time after time.

“Can you take it from here, Trent? I’ll bring Murph up to speed if you get Bernatelli to the warehouse,” he says to the tall man who’s waiting to take my place at the wheel.

“Come on, princess. I’m not going to allow you to do something you’ll regret or have to live with forever,” Dereck says. Trent lowers himself into my spot, sliding the power seat way back to accommodate his length, before strapping himself in and driving away.

Dereck cradles me in his arms and carries me to his car, placing me in the passenger seat and buckling me in. I sit resignedly, watching the taillights of the car driving away with the man who has the key to my sister’s whereabouts in its passenger seat grow farther and farther away.

Dereck gets in on the other side and hits the overhead. “Hey, Murph. Let the guys know we’re back on schedule, but about thirty minutes behind. Trent’s on his way with the package. ETA twenty minutes.”

“Roger that, Dereck. Great work, my friend.”

“Thanks for the help, Murph. Talk to you later,” Dereck says, disconnecting before taking the next exit.

I’m quiet, too many things running through my mind at the very same time, but when I see the Prestian emblem on the skyrise ahead, I realize

where he's taking me. "I don't know why we're going back to your condo. I need the information Bernatelli has to find my sister. Where is Trent taking him, and why aren't we going there too?"

"I'm taking you back to the condo so I can punish you for lying to me, and then we're going to sit down and have a conversation about how we're going to proceed with the plan that I had to work on alone since you ducked out to do your own thing instead of helping me develop it."

What he says both excites and overwhelms me. He has to be tired of all my baggage. "Aren't you tired of all the drama? Scared I'll run again? I've tried to tell you. This thing with my sister is not something I'm going to let go. I need to find her, Dereck. I'm not going to give up looking for her. She means everything to me."

"Relax, Princess. We'll find your sister," Dereck says, pulling into the parking area outside of The Prestian Towers.

Ramon doesn't recognize the car and saunters over, but the minute he sees Dereck and me, he grins from ear to ear and jolts over to Dereck's open window. "Hey there! Glad you found her," he says, gesturing to me with a nod of his head.

I lean in toward Dereck and look up at Ramon through the open window. "The name's Layla."

Ramon grins. "Glad the boss found you."

"Something I'm missing?" I ask, looking from him to Dereck, who's trying to disguise a smile.

"Ramon does some work for the team and me every once in a while," he tells me.

"I see. Were you looking for me, Ramon?" I ask, smiling at the exuberant young man.

"Just watching for you to show up here. No major recon yet. I'm still waiting for my first assignment," Ramon says, still grinning.

"Well, rest easy. The boss has found me," I assure him.

"We won't be needing the car any further tonight, but do you want to bring it around about nine a.m.? Layla and I need to be at the martial arts center for a little precompetition sparring at ten," Dereck tells Ramon.

Dereck doesn't look at me to see if I'm game or not. He just hands Ramon his keys through the window, gets out, and walks around to my side of the vehicle.

"Come on, princess," he says, opening my door and taking my hand to

assist me.

I glance over to Ramon, who's heard the exchange. "The name's Layla to everyone but him," I say, gesturing to the boss who's looking down at me with amusement as he guides me to the door, greeting the bellman who holds the door for us as we walk into the skyscraper and head to the private elevators.

The doors close, and I give him my most intimidating look. "Everyone seems to think you're such a nice guy. Do they know you run around kidnapping women and spank them when they don't do what you want?"

"Princess, that's hardly a fair assessment. I recall you shivering in my arms and letting me pick you up quite willingly. As far as the spanking goes, you'll ask me for that before we begin," he says as the doors open to the penthouse.

I laugh out loud at the audacity while my center wets with need. "I don't think so, papi. I want to know about Bernatelli," I tell him.

Dereck gives me a wink. "Make yourself comfortable. We'll get to him, but first things first," he says, gesturing me to the barstool before going to the refrigerator. He pulls out a bottle of water and lays it on the counter, opens the cupboard overhead to get two glasses, pours them both three-quarters of the way full, and places one in front of me.

I glance from it to him. "On duty tonight?" I ask because a glass of wine would be a welcomed choice right about now.

"No wine until after we've finished," Dereck says.

"With what?" I ask, but the tingling between my thighs and thrum of my blood tells me precisely what he's planning, without him saying a word.

"I told you before, the use of the word fine said with an attitude will always land you over the top of my thighs, whether you belong to me or not."

"I haven't agreed to submit. I recall a deal-breaker involved. We both know I'm more than interested, but I can't agree to all of your rules, Dereck. I was honest when I told you that not being able to dance at the club is a deal-breaker for me. I have to find my sister."

Dereck takes a drink of his water while watching me. "It's because you haven't learned to trust me yet. I haven't earned it yet, Princess, but I will. There was no reason for you to have had to get on that stage tonight if you had trusted me and we'd developed a plan together. I'm not planning to wait to give you what I promised, though, because you were completely aware of the consequences when you said it."

"What if I say I'm sorry?"

“I told you, mine or not, what would happen,” Dereck says, walking into the bedroom, coming back with a wrapped-up towel, placing it on the end table by the couch before stalking back to my side.

I lower my eyes from his gaze, looking into the clearness of the water.

“I want to see your eyes when we’re talking,” Dereck tells me, soaking in my emotions with those deep grey steely eyes that seem to see right through me and all of my rebuttal. He knows how much I want this and sees right through my denial and performance.

He extends a hand to me. “You can say no, but if you don’t, it’s time to learn what I mean by a consequence, Princess, and ask me for your spanking.”

Chapter 20

Dereck

The gold flecks of desire bouncing from her deep brown eyes are intriguing and arousing, causing my pants to draw tight.

I take a seat on the couch and stand her in front of me. “We can do this one of two ways. Completely dressed or bared only to your ass, princess. It’s your choice to make, but only because it’s the first time.”

Her eyes are hazy with desire, but she swallows hard, reminding me of her inexperience in matters like this. I turn her palm upward and scroll a pattern, a small, silent reassurance that she’ll be safe under my hand.

She surprises me when not many things do. “What would you prefer, Dereck?”

“I’ve wanted to bare your ass since you sassed off at me the very first time, Layla. I’d like you to bare your ass to me willingly, and only that, knowing you’ll be receiving the consequence I warned you about, but that you’ll be secure under my hand. It may sting, and you may wish it were over far sooner than it ends, but you won’t be harmed and will always be safe under my care.”

Layla’s eyes begin to dilate, and her breathing softens. “Take off your pants for me, princess.”

Her cheeks brighten, and her breath hitches, making my cock turn to stone as I watch her settle into her need. She unbuttons her jeans while her nipples harden under her thin tank, letting me know how turned on my fiery beauty is and that she is ready to submit.

She slides her jeans off, pausing at her hips and giving me a coy smile.

“No show or teasing tonight, princess,” I say as she tries to seduce me with her charm.

She purses her lips and slides her pants over the toned curves of her hips. “All the way off. Panties too.”

She inhales, and then, in quick movements, slides her pants down to her feet, using her toes to tug off the jeans past her ankles and feet. She touches the waistband of her panties, playing with the lace, dragging this out, and still trying to get the upper hand.

“If you keep toying with me, princess, you’re going to earn more than you bargained for. Now quit teasing and slide those beautiful panties down around your ankles so I can spank your sweet little ass.”

Her eyes lower, and she does as I ask. “When I bend you over, you’ll stay right where I put you. You won’t kick, bite, hit, or any of that to get me to stop. I told you the consequence of using that word, yet you chose to use it anyway. Not only that, but along with lying, you left me without telling me where you were going among a multitude of other infractions we won’t even address here tonight. I realize this dynamic is new to you. If, for any reason, it becomes too much, emotionally or physically, I expect that you’ll simply ask me to stop, and I will. Understand, princess?” I ask, observing her for any signs of fear.

She looks like a dark-haired angel with dilated and hazy bedroom eyes, watching me intently as her hardened nipples strain against the thin material of her tank. Her hitch of breath without answer tells me she’s still getting her mind wrapped around the idea of getting spanked, but she’s not scared, just turned on and nervous.

“It’s time, princess,” I tell her, tugging her gently over my lap.

Layla’s arms dangle over my legs, and I can feel the inhalations of her breathing and the heat of her body through my pants.

I settle her in, helping her get into position, rubbing her ass cheeks, one side and then the other, admiring the firmness of her rounded derriere.

She stretches her toes and leans into my thighs, getting comfortable.

“That’s right, princess,” I say, glad to see that she’s accepting of her spanking while admiring the graceful view her stretch presents.

“I sense you’re not experienced with the lifestyle, but you’re not completely new to it either. Have you been someone’s submissive before?”

She doesn’t answer right away, but I give her the time she needs, intrigued by her knowledge and desire but relative inexperience.

“No, but I wanted to be. The job didn’t lend itself to that type of relationship.”

“I see. So only play sessions, no relationship?”

“Exactly. He wanted more, and in a way, I did too, but it would have meant giving up everything I had achieved. I couldn’t do that.”

I inhale deeply, knowing that I’ve now been the second who’s asked her to give up her profession and that she’s said no to both of us. A long-term relationship simply may not be what she is willing to give. The rest of my plans for her this evening will need to wait now, but I made it clear that whether she belonged to me or not, this is what would happen if she used that damn word with that tone again, and I fully intend to carry out my promise.

The way her ass lays across my lap makes my cock throb with desire underneath her.

She answers by squirming, rubbing her pussy against my lap, trying to take pleasure for herself. I quit stroking and smack her on the ass too gently to really smart. A little tap to let her know I’m here. “No pleasure for you unless I decide to give it to you, princess.”

Layla realizes what she’s done. “I’m sorry,” she says, and the soft sound of her submission taking root tells me she needs this as much as I do.

“That’s alright, princess. You’ll learn in time.” I realize that we will have time together, some type of future together because regardless of her aversion to giving up dancing topless, she is going to be mine. One way or another, we will work this out because the incredible attraction to this fiery and mysterious submissive is much more than skin deep or something that will ever wane. This magnetism to my princess doesn’t let go, only gets more potent, and with every encounter she tugs on my dominance with a power that won’t let go.

“Ready, princess?” I ask, caressing the warmed skin exposed and tilted upright in a perfect position for my lesson.

“I’m ready,” she says, so softly it’s barely audible.

My open hand rubs her cheeks a few more times, letting her anticipation of what’s to come grow before landing it on her upturned ass.

She squeals and automatically wiggles out of position, trying to ward off my hand.

“Back in position, princess. This is just a warmup. Relax your body, especially your cheeks, and settle into it. It will get you ready for your well-deserved spanking.”

Layla gently huffs but does as I ask. I bring my open palm down, landing on her delicate ass cheeks, one then the other, and then again, getting her skin

nice and warm. Her breathing is regular, and she's doing well, pressed firmly into my lap when I begin. The first hand to her ass, the one she's intended to feel, does precisely that.

Layla squeals but remains firmly pressed against my lap.

I'm pleased with Layla's ability to get her head wrapped around an experience so new. I continue, bringing my hand down, alternating ass cheeks with careful purpose, each one meant to ensure she knows exactly what a consequence feels like, hoping to create a deterrent in the future.

We're just over halfway through when she lifts her head and stretches her arms, trying to cover her ass.

"Hands down, princess, or we start over each time they get in the way," I say, ensuring the burn is real to reinforce the need for her to stay in position after I've asked her to do just that.

I'm rewarded with a little cry. Layla's hands remain hanging over my lap, although her body has tensed with the passion and sting to her backside.

My fiery beauty is brave and courageous, taking her punishment with the same determination and passion that she gives to everything. If she asked me to stop, it would be over immediately. Instead, she weathers through the last few strokes of her spanking, meant to last in her memory, and only loses position and slackens against my legs as my hand ceases its pattern across her ass.

I caress her, something I'm not usually inclined to do. "That's as hard a spanking as it will get with me, Layla, but you should know that if that's not a deterrent, there are plenty of other ways to curb a naughty submissive's errant ways. The next time, you might find your plug replaced with a wet piece of ginger root. Let me warn you. It's not a punishment you would like."

She remains silent but brushes herself against my crotch as I continue to rub her ass, making it difficult for me to stop her motion, but I do. "Princess, who gives you your pleasure?" I ask.

"You give me my pleasure. I don't take it. For the record, I'm sorry about lying and everything else," Layla says, wiping her tears shyly and causing my cock to strain against my pants as it seeks her heat.

I don't tell her it's okay because it's not, and as if just now realizing what she's doing, she stops gently grinding her pussy against my thigh.

"I didn't expect to get so aroused," Layla says gently, causing me to smile, looking down at my bare-assed passionate beauty. I shouldn't give in or reward her with what she needs after a punishment, but nothing is going as

prescribed by my rules with Layla, and this is no different.

I slide my hands beneath her so I can run a finger through her arousal. She murmurs her pleasure with that little sound she makes, causing my cock to throb hard against her belly.

Her body is tense, trying her best to keep from creating her pleasure instead of allowing me control over how it is delivered. I reward her well and put my rules aside, stroking through her wetness, letting her build and build until she cries out with the need to move against the pleasure. She tries to control herself, but she maintains her position perfectly. "Come for me, princess," I instruct, and she moans my name over and over as her body trembles with her release and continues until I slow my movement and allow her ride to subside.

I assist her from my lap. "Kneel for me, princess," I instruct, helping her into the position and watching her eyes still filled with haze. "Raise your arms for me." When she has done what I ask, I lift the tank from her body, caressing down her neck, around her collarbone, and then dipping into the center of her cleavage. "So beautiful, princess," I say, releasing her breasts from the sexy material before lifting her from her position and into my arms.

I lay down and bring her with me, cradling her body against mine before covering us both with the blanket on the couch.

Layla drifts, sleeping peacefully in my arms after giving herself to me willingly, trusting that I wouldn't give her more than she could take, but all that she deserved. I contemplate how perfect my princess is, but the reality is that she isn't mine. She's been upfront and honest with me about her need to continue dancing. It's something I'll need to give serious consideration. It means more to her than I initially thought if she's chosen it over other relationships in the past.

My mind goes to the wrapped towel, to the special gift I purchased for Layla and planned to give her tonight. It will keep until I know she's mine. There has to be a middle ground because watching my princess dance for other men is not something I find palatable or acceptable, but diminishing something Layla loves so much does not interest me at all.

My cell buzzes. I reach into my pocket and pull it out, trying not to disturb Layla as I do.

Message: Bernatelli's talking. Lead on the girl. Call ASAP.

I shift slightly and look down at Layla, who's faded into a deep and restful sleep. I connect with the man I've hired, someone who does this kind

of work for a living and will ensure any repercussions don't come back to our team or the men who employ us.

"Sorry, man, I just wasn't sure how to say this, and time is short."

"Just spit it out," I tell him.

"There's a shipment of girls going out tonight. We have the location, but Bernatelli couldn't assure us that the girl's still alive."

"Text me the address," I say, disconnecting and reconnecting with Murph. At the same time, the address pops into my phone.

"There's a shipment of girls going down at the docks. I'll send you the address," I tell Murph.

"I'll round back with Trent and Liam. Most of the men are on the case with Bryanna, and if you're at The Prestian Towers, then you're closer than anyone. I'm looking up the scheduled shipments for tonight. There's only one boat on the list, and it's supposed to leave shore in less than forty minutes, so you're going to have to move and come in quiet or with a diversion," Murph says.

Layla shifts, causing me to glance down, finding her wide awake. She's listening to the conversation and watching me warily with those intent dark brown eyes.

"Call me back with the details in the car. I'll get ready and leave now," I tell Murph, sitting up with Layla in my arms.

She immediately detangles herself, gets up, and starts to dress, but she's still listening, widely interested in the one-sided conversation.

"Roger that; I'll get it figured out on the way to the boat. Keep Bernatelli on ice in case we need him later. We'll figure out what to do with him then."

"Got it. Be careful, Dereck. These fuckers don't mess around," Murph says.

"Roger that," I say, disconnecting and heading for the bedroom while Layla finishes putting her clothes on. I crouch onto the floor by the bed, pull out a large black case, and place it on the bed before opening it.

I hear Layla's intake of breath behind me as I collect the items I'll need from the arsenal.

"You have anything for me, or are you going to let me go in unarmed?" Layla says.

"That's easy. You're not going to put yourself in harm's way."

"This isn't going to be one of the decisions you make for me. This is my sister. I'm going whether you like it or not. You get to decide if I drive with

you or follow.”

“That’s not how this relationship works.”

Chapter 21

Layla

Dereck turns, penetrating me with those deep dark gray eyes that see right through my very soul, and at this moment are making my heart pound with apprehension. Luisa means the world to me, and he wants me to sit idly by and wait without doing a thing to help my sister? As much as I have come to care about him, want to submit, there is no way that I can do that.

“I’ve seen your weapon of choice. How are you with a gun?” Dereck asks. I sigh a breath of relief that he’s not going to fight me on this.

“Good. Damn good.”

He rubs the dark hairs of his chin, contemplating, but finally nods. He selects a sleek black Glock from his arsenal and a magazine of rounds. I watch his strong, confident fingers sliding the magazine in before pulling it back to load one in the chamber. He then pulls the magazine out of the gun and tops it off with the missing round.

I frown. “Different way to load a gun?”

He turns, knitting his eyebrows before handing it to me. “You have a round of fifteen with one in the chamber. Loading it from the magazine instead of dropping it directly in creates less wear on the mechanisms over time,” he says, handing me a pair of gloves. “I assume you still have your own. Take this as a backup,” Dereck says, giving me a knife that rivals my own.

“Give me a minute, and I’ll get another pair of shoes,” I tell him, heading to the bedroom to throw on my running shoes and grab my bag.

When I reach the living room, he has two Kevlar vests, one of which he tosses at me. “Put this on,” he says.

My eyebrows raise, taking in his stern demeanor and the military-grade

equipment. "I can help you if you need it," he offers.

"I can manage." I grab a long-sleeved shirt out of my bag and slip it over my head before strapping myself in and securing it in place. "There. All set."

"Let's get going then. In case you didn't hear this part of my conversation, Bernatelli's crew is heading toward a boat docked down by the lake. It'll be making its way out of port in about half an hour, so we need to move fast," Dereck says.

"I did catch that, Dereck, but I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. It was impossible not to hear with the phone less than six inches from my ear."

"I know, Layla. It would have been preferable had you not heard it. Then I could have left you blissfully unaware and safe from danger."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry I'm not what you're looking for, Dereck. I told you my life doesn't seem conducive to being submissive. I guess it's better if we both know the truth before it gets too late into the relationship," I tell him.

He slides his fingers through the dark hairs of his chin. "Perhaps, princess," he says, caressing my cheek.

I fight hard with everything that I have, willing the tears not to come, and they don't. They hold back, just like the emotion ready to explode from my chest.

Dereck's about to say something else, but his phone buzzes, and he takes a moment to read it and scowls. "We'll finish this later, but for now, we should get going," he says, opening the door for me as we leave the condo and head to the elevator. Ramon pulls up curbside with a fancy silver jeep and steps out. "I could learn to like that ride," he says, grinning at Dereck as he gets out and tosses him the keys.

"Great job, Ramon. Thanks for getting it here so quick," Dereck says, walking to the passenger side and opening my door.

"Thank you." I slip into the luxurious leather bucket seat, but he doesn't answer, just closes the door behind me and walks to the other side of the vehicle, seemingly deep in thought.

When Dereck gets in, he fastens his seat belt and glances toward mine. He seems satisfied since it's already buckled, and with that, he eases out of the exit zone, heads down the end of the drive, and then takes a right onto the road that will lead us out to the highway.

His phone rings. Dereck hits a button on the steering wheel that engages the speaker system overhead. "Hey, Murph. I have you on speakerphone, and

Layla's with me. We're heading out to the docks," he says.

"I don't like you going without a full team, Dereck. Trent and Liam are on their way to meet you, but the other guys are still out of town, and I haven't heard back from another call I made to get a little extra help yet."

"There's no way around it if we're going to get Layla's sister before that ship leaves port," he tells Murph.

"Alright. We're locked into the security system cameras on the dock and can at least help you with intel from here," Murph says. "Wait a minute. I just got a message from the Larussio crew. We've got backup, Dereck. We reached out to Chase Prestian, and he contacted his father-in-law to get men to help us. They're on their way, courtesy of Carlos Larussio, which means mafia against the mafia, so we're going to owe Carlos a debt of gratitude when this is over."

"I'll take that debt. The crime side of the Larussio Family may be mafia, but they're not snatching women and sending them to a life of sexual slavery, like Bernatelli and his bunch; that's for damn sure," Dereck says.

"Alright, as long as you know, they may handle things a little different than our men would," Murph says.

"Roger that. Say no more," Dereck says, glancing at me briefly as he disconnects.

"I'm not going to tell anyone, papi. I made my peace with right and wrong a long time ago. I appreciate their help to stop these people from what they're doing. These women have no choice. They were snatched from their existence by any means necessary. They're drugged, tortured, raped, and all kinds of inhumane things. I just want to find my sister and help anyone that I can. That's all I've wanted to do since she went missing," I say, wiping a tear because we're finally so close. The last three weeks of doing whatever it took to get the tiniest threads of information are all catching up with me. My sister may have a chance. We might finally find and bring her home where she belongs, and the things I've done will be a small price to pay.

"Follow my lead and get in sync with my breathing, princess."

I inhale deeply and follow Dereck's breath, trying to calm myself, inhaling as he does, breath after breath. After a short time, my body synchronizes with the soothing rhythm of his breathing, calming me as we continue to drive toward the water.

The overhead speaker rings just as Dereck pulls off the main highway and navigates a back road toward the shore's lower edge. "Marenah's all over this

after what she went through with this guy. She said to let you know that if you want anything to hold up in court, you'll have to wait until they've transferred the girls to the boat and that it needs to be moving offshore before they can be charged with trafficking to the degree you're going to want," Murph says.

"Roger that," Dereck tells him before disconnecting.

"You really know how to shoot that gun if you need it?" he asks me.

"I know how to shoot it, Dereck. You don't have to worry about me. I'll be able to help you and your men."

"I'd rather you stay where I position you. No questions asked when I do. Can you do that for me, unless we have no other choice, Layla?"

"Always the questions that make me lie," I tell him because until this is over, telling him the truth is impossible. I wish it were as simple as just giving over and letting him take the reins and fix this, but he can't, and so I'm caught in this never-ending web of lies.

"The truth isn't hard if you trust someone, but trust takes time. Unfortunately, that isn't something we have much of, so for now, do what I ask so that I can protect you," Dereck says.

My chest tightens. I may have already lost the one man who makes me feel completely whole, and until I took things into my own hands was more than willing to take the reins, but I had no choice once Maverick recognized me at the martial arts center.

Dereck navigates the Jeep through the overgrowth from the surrounding trees and wild bushes before slipping into a somewhat cleared area and parking. He pulls out two pairs of binoculars from the bag he's brought and hands me one so that we can see far down the shoreline.

"Where do you think they'll come in from?"

"The message I got back at the condo said they might be using a van. The last time we ended up on a trafficking sting, they used a semi."

"Your team got that out of Bernatelli?"

"Something like that," he says.

"Damn. People think trafficking is just a girl here or there. They have no idea the thousands of young people snatched from their lives every single day."

"I couldn't agree more, but we're going to stop this delivery, and we'll get your sister out if she's in that van."

"This means so much to me. Even if I had gotten Bernatelli to talk, the

likelihood of me being able to get to the right place and stop this thing singlehandedly is doubtful. I never imagined a scenario where things would go down like this,” I admit.

“You’re welcome, Layla.” He points, gesturing me to follow his gaze where a minivan is making its way down one of the roads to shore. I adjust my binoculars for the distance and the terrain's darkness, focusing in on the people just as they are getting out of the van.

Dereck engages the overhead, and Murph picks up. “You see what I’m seeing, Murph?”

“I sure do. Marenah’s here with me monitoring the cameras. I think she’d give anything to be down there with you. She’s fighting mad that Bernatelli is running girls from the same damn shore, especially after everything that happened the last time.”

“Yes, I am! You still have the son of a bitch?” a woman drawls, cutting into his conversation in an accent that sounds foreign, maybe Russian.

“Hi, Marenah,” Dereck says to the overhead.

“Hi, Dereck and Layla. The team has been monitoring ships coming in and out of this harbor, and not one has gone out without a full inspection of cargo, so we need to be extremely cautious. This very well may be a setup by Bernatelli,” Marenah says.

“He’s not going anywhere until I get Layla’s sister out safely, so I doubt that he’d chance the blowback,” Dereck says.

“We’re here if you need anything,” Marenah says.

“Thank you, Marenah. I appreciate that and all the help you were in finding her. I understand you’ve done a lot of work in the background,” I tell her.

“Well, I certainly can’t take credit for finding your sister, but bringing that no good Bernatelli to heel? Yes, ma’am, I’ll take full credit for helping get him to the right place at the right time,” she says.

I look at Dereck, who’s watching the horizon intently and doesn’t give any indication he’s heard a word she’s said or plans to tell me what she means.

“Gotta sign off, Marenah.” Dereck disconnects and reengages with another number. “Hey, Trent. We have movement to the far east.”

“I’m watching the road to make sure no one else passes through, and Liam’s on his way with your ride.”

“Can you get a close-up?” Dereck says.

“Roger that, Dereck. Give me a second to get focused. We have them in our sights.”

My fingers wrap tightly around the binoculars, trying to focus in at this distance, but my hands are shaking.

“Marenah has connections. She made sure Bernatelli went to the bar last night, which was part of the plan I intended to put together with your help before you left,” Dereck says, watching the shoreline while answering the question on my mind.

I only nod because the words simply don't come. I decided to protect my family, causing me to be the opposite of submissive, lose another chance to be with Dereck, and find the piece of myself I've always been missing. Luisa's life is worth every single thing I've done or will need to do in the future, though, and I know that.

“Steady, princess. Deep breaths to calm your nerves. I need you to focus on the car down by the shore and give me confirmation that it's your sister when you see her.”

I get the adjustment on the lenses made and breathe deeply, following his instruction, following the gaze of his binoculars, and my chest tightens with recognition. “It's her, Dereck. It's my sister. We found her! We found Luisa!”

Chapter 22

Dereck

A minivan pulls up behind the parked car, turning off their lights as another light catches my gaze and shifts my attention to a large fishing boat. It seems like just days ago that I worked backup on this same shore. The organized crime syndicate with far-reaching arms almost got away with trafficking hundreds of people until we shut that delivery down cold and drove that particular faction out of our city, but there's always someone else looking to make a buck, and as sick as trafficking is, it pays well. Bernatelli seems to be running things on a much smaller scale, probably the only reason Marenah and her team didn't home in on the fact that they're starting to run girls out of this dock again.

"He's never going to stop until someone stops him," Layla says, and she's right, of that I have no doubt.

"Ready?" I ask Layla, whose eyes haven't left the car which holds her sister. She may talk a tough game, but the hard exterior shell is just her defense mechanism, a way to protect herself. I can tell because the soft feminine side of Layla makes me want to do it for her.

"I'm ready, Dereck."

"I'll get you to a safe place, but close enough to see what's going on. We're short men, so I need to focus on the task at hand, and if you're in danger, my focus will be on you," I say, inching the car forward in the dark, little by little until we've made it down the terrain to a small ravine. I park the Jeep and go around to Layla's side of the vehicle, opening the door and handing her an earpiece. "Put this in, Layla. You'll be plugged into the team chat. Stay off the line unless you need something. I know how much this means to you. For the record, I wouldn't have really left you home if you

hadn't been listening, but you would be watching from a safe place and not in the middle of a fucking mafia war zone if it were up to me."

She starts to say something, apologies maybe, even though the words haven't formed yet, but a sound in the undergrowth diverts my attention. I gesture to the undergrowth right before a four-wheeler comes into sight. It pulls up right beside us, and Liam hops off the machine and shakes my hand. "Thanks, Liam. This is Layla. Layla, this is Liam, one of our partners."

"Nice to meet you. Thanks for your help," Layla tells him. She clearly doesn't recognize him from the car in front of her when he helped me pull her off the highway.

"No problem," Liam says to Layla and then turns to me. "I'll make sure no one gets through from this entrance. Trent's already in place on the other side."

"Excellent. Let's run it according to plan." He has the outline we put together last night, knowing that at some point we were going to get the call, and that Marenah felt strongly it was going to be on the shore; we weren't sure when.

I get on the four-wheeler and gesture in front of me. "Close quarters on this ride, princess," I tell her as she looks suspiciously at the machine and the sparse seating left for her after my body has settled into the seat.

"I don't bite," I tell her, smiling.

Layla's lips purse with feigned annoyance, but she's not going to let a little thing like closeness to me stand in her way. She hoists her leg over the middle of the machine. I grasp her by the waist, lifting and settling her slight frame on the seat, before snuggling her against me, right where she belongs, whether she realizes it or not.

It takes time to get through the terrain and undergrowth and to the other side of the shore. Thoughts of how dangerous this could be for Layla creep into my mind, causing me to second guess my decision to let her come down this far to the shore instead of insisting that she stay far out of danger, but it's too late now. She hasn't submitted to me, doesn't have to listen to me, and has no idea that I won't let her throw away what we have because she's scared. Either way, with her sister's life in the balance, knowing my fiery princess, she would have made her way to the action one way or another. When we're close, I pull into a small clearing, get off the four-wheeler, and help her down. "We'll walk the rest of the way, so they don't hear us."

I turn her to me one last time, stroking the softness of her cheek. "If

anything goes south tonight, if you need to use your piece, you shoot to kill, and do not hesitate because not one of these people has a thing to lose. If you miss or just hurt them and they get a shot off, they will kill you. Don't think for a moment they won't."

"Roger that," Layla says, leaning up and kissing me lightly on the lips. "Don't worry, papi. I'll do as you ask, and if all else fails, I'll slay them with my dagger!"

I laugh, holding my fierce, passionate beauty for a moment longer than I should. "Let's go, princess," I say, parting the overgrowth and creating a path that she can follow without getting cut by the thistle and thorns.

When we reach the perimeter, I give Trent a nod, knowing he's settled in on this side and will make sure no one else comes through as long as he can prevent it. We inch ourselves forward, getting as close as we can. "This is where you're going to stay. I'll make my way around the bend. When they start transferring your sister to that boat, don't be surprised when we move in. We're working with Larussio's men tonight, and I think you know what that means."

"Yeah, it means the Larussios are infringing on Bernatelli's business, and the two mafia families are going to go head-to-head tonight. You work with the Larussios often?" I ask.

"Roundabout way. I work for Chase Prestian, and he's Carlos Larussio's son-in-law," I tell her.

The look on Layla's face tells me that things just clicked into place.

"Katarina Meilers. She's the daughter Carlos didn't know about for most of her life, right? She's been coined the mafia princess in all the tabloids," Layla says.

I nod. "That would be Katarina. The family has a lot of history, but they're good people regardless of how you feel about their business line. They're not trafficking women and are going to help us get your sister back, so good in my book," I tell her.

Layla nods. "There was a time not too long ago when it would have bothered me, maybe would have crossed lines of appropriateness. Not so much now," she says.

"I'm going to work my way around. Keep your earpiece in, and stay out of sight, princess, or there will be consequences you don't want to learn, and I will deliver them whether you agree to be mine or not," I tell her, leaving her with that thought while heading down the ravine and toward my target.

“Team one, come in,” I say to Trent, the only team I have on this side of the shore for now, having switched to our predesignated channel, edging toward the other side of the car as the boat slowly pulls to shore. I lay the guns I’ve brought in a line, knowing if I need to that I can make them think there are more of us than there are from this distance.

“Team one’s here in position, and everything’s quiet. I’ll stay in position. The Larussio boys are farther up the ravine with earpieces. You’ll approach from behind?” Trent asks.

“Roger that. I’ll come in from behind with the Larussio boys in the wing.”

“The mafia boys are in position,” someone says, laughing.

I laugh, recognizing Tommy, one of the men who’s worked with us on a dozen or so other jobs. “Smartass. Get your teams ready, and we’ll show you how it’s done,” I tease him.

“We’ll cover your ass. You just get those ladies out of there, and then let us deal with these sons of bitches,” Tommy says, and I don’t have an issue with that.

“Roger that, Tommy, roger that,” I say, as the front doors to the car holding Layla’s sister open.

Two men get out, and one opens the back passenger side door. A man climbs out of one side, another man gets out on the other side and then bends to get Layla’s sister from the back middle seat.

The minivan driver is watching, and he and the guy in his front passenger seat get out. The driver pushes a button on his key fob, and the right side of the van opens. He pulls woman after woman out of the vehicle until I’ve counted a total of twelve. I don’t know how they’ve managed to pack them into the space of that vehicle. Still, there they are, all standing outside the vehicle while someone barks at them to stand still and not to move until he tells them to move.

Two men jump down from the boat and onto the ramp that they’ve thrown out to the shore, and head our way. My cell buzzes, and I glance down at the incoming call.

Marenah wouldn’t call this line unless she needed to talk to me personally. She knows we’re on the job and that she could catch the team on the group line. I answer but don’t say a word.

“Dereck. I know you probably can’t talk, but something’s not right. It’s about Layla.”

“What about her,” I ask quietly, as I continue watching the men from the boat make their way toward the men who drove in.

“I tracked her cousin’s whereabouts for the last couple of weeks before her death.”

My jaw tightens with apprehension as the men from the boat and the car shake hands and the men from the van push the group of women toward the men from the vehicle who make them join Layla’s sister, bringing the count to thirteen women whose lives are in my hands.

“You need to know,” Marenah says, but she gets cut off by the reverberating sound of semi-automatic fire cutting through the silence of the night, and the men surrounding Luisa drop like pins at a bowling alley, one after another, leaving her standing all alone in a pool of carnage that only the mafia can bring.

Tommy from the Larussio family comes running out of the woods. I disconnect my call and drop my cell into my pocket. This slaughter was probably orchestrated by the Larussios to ensure Bernatelli’s men know that trafficking in the city is off-limits. Bernatelli may have owned this city for years, but the Larussios seem to have gained a stronghold in the town and made their own set of rules.

I work my way toward the car, determined to get Layla’s sister and the others to safety and at least salvage some part of this night if I can. “Hold your fire,” I say, coming out of the bush. “You and your men have what you want, Tommy, but I need the girls.”

I gesture toward Layla’s sister. “We’ll take Luisa along with the rest of the women and let you deal with Bernatelli’s men however you choose,” I say, wondering what type of message they’ll send back with the bodies.

Tommy shrugs. “I’ve got no beef with that as long as she’s not running the girls, but word on the street says different.”

I look from Tommy to Layla’s sister and back to him. “If you say she’s not part of Bernatelli’s crew,” Tommy says, “then I gotta believe you.”

I glance down at my phone and Marenah’s message. “Luisa is the snatcher.”

“You working for Bernatelli? Did you take those girls?” Tommy asks Luisa, coming toe to toe with Layla’s sister.

“I’m not saying anything against Bernatelli. That would make me crazy.”

“You don’t start talking, sweetheart, and that would make you dead,” Tommy says, grabbing one of the girls by the hair and dragging her in front

of Layla's sister. "How did you end up with her, sweetheart," Tommy asks the young blonde who's now sobbing uncontrollably and trying desperately to pull herself away.

She looks at Luisa and then shakes her head, unwilling to talk until Tommy puts a gun to her head, causing her to cry out hysterically. "I met her at the bus station. She said there were good-paying jobs at the bar. I went there for work, and she took me into her office. There were two men, and they..."

Tommy shifts his gun to Luisa's head. "You're coming with me, and you're going to join your boss, sweetheart. I don't think he's going to be so glad to see you in this condition, though, is he?" Tommy asks Layla's sister.

Luisa doesn't say a word, but I can't help recognize the slight purse of annoyance on her lips.

I walk toward the young girl, pulling her away from Tommy and Luisa and to safety. "Your sister has been looking everywhere for you. She thought traffickers took you. She's been working dive bars to get any information she could to find and help you. She's an honorable woman, and you repay her like this?" I ask Luisa.

Her lips look like Layla's until she turns them into a snarl and laughs right in my face. "My sister thinks upholding the law is honorable. She wears that goddamn police uniform and forgets where she comes from! She forgets the police, her kind, did nothing when thugs overran our community. We had nothing! Where were her and her kind when we had nothing to eat! No, upholding the law is not honorable. It is an old fashioned stupidity. Honor is doing what you need to do to ensure your family rises, that the next generation of children do not go through the struggles that we went through as children, but that's not what she believes. Layla puts on that stinking police uniform and dares to walk into our family home, flaunting that in front of me! She was the one who should have felt that bullet. It should have ripped through her heart, pierced her with pain just like Layla did to our family, not our cousin! My sister, that traitor, is only alive because the men working with me got the wrong woman, the wrong Layla," she says, spitting on the ground in front of me.

"She's all yours, Tommy," I say, knowing that Layla heard every venomous word of her sister's tirade through the earpiece and that her soft, feminine side is probably breaking into a million pieces right now. Although, somehow, she'll probably put on the tough girl exterior she always manages

to conjure to protect her heart.

I turn from Luisa to calm the young woman who spoke out and is still sobbing. “I’m Dereck,” I say to her and the rest of the girls. “We’re going to take you somewhere safe for the night, where you can clean up and get something to eat. We’ll help you find your families or whatever else you need tomorrow, okay?” I tell them, looking from one pair of fearful eyes to another. “Come on, ladies,” I say, contemplating how to navigate through this turn of events now that I know the part of the story that Layla could never tell me herself.

We’ll need to deal with that later because priority number one is getting her out of here alive after she witnessed Tommy and his men gun down her sister’s associates in cold blood, and we now know she’s on the other side of the law. The family does not leave loose ends or witnesses to their crimes, and unfortunately, Layla is both right now.

“You go ahead with the girls. We’ll be right behind you,” Tommy says.

I start walking with the ladies, knowing that Tommy has things wrapped up, but a shot rings out from a distance. I grab my weapon and spin, dropping to the ground to aim, but Layla’s sister has already taken one of the girls. Luisa’s gun is drawn, and she uses the girl as a shield, and there’s no way to get off a clean shot without getting the innocent girl in the crossfire.

Chapter 23

Layla

I observe from behind the bush, listening to the venomous outpour that's as clear in my ear as if I was standing right next to the sister I grew up with, willing the tears washing down my face to stop. The police were a beacon of light in an otherwise dim existence, bringing a glimmer of hope and protection to our community when few existed. Luisa and I both remember our childhood so differently, and I sob for the heartbreak my parents would have endured if they were still alive and learned their daughter had turned into someone they did everything to protect us from as children.

Dereck leads the ladies away, walking them towards the vehicles. I watch with sadness as Tommy takes my sister by the arm, turning her, and starts to check for weapons. A shot from my left throws Tommy to the ground with the force of its blow. Dereck hits the ground and pulls his piece, but my sister's used the distraction to draw her weapon on the young girl closest to her.

I draw my own. Dereck won't make it unless someone gets to the gun that came from so close by that my ears are still ringing. I snake around the bushes, and Tommy's partner Marco is just below me, scanning the brush, too, looking for the same gun I am, but not before the man with the gun has him in his sites.

My feet move without thought, all my training taking over, and it takes me mere minutes to scramble quietly over the terrain and get the drop on him. "Gun on the ground. Do it now," I say, holding mine to the back of his head.

He drops it, and I pull zip ties from my belt loop and restrain him. "If you move, you die," I tell him, pushing him to a sitting position on a boulder while watching my sister and the scene below. Luisa's still trying to decide

what to do. Tommy may have taken a hit, but she knows if she gets a shot off at Dereck, it might give Tommy a chance to take her out.

Dereck is braced on the ground, ready to take a shot, to put an end to my sister's life to save these women from a life of slavery, biding his time until he can do it without hurting the girl. My sister can't take both him and Tommy at the same time, but he can't shoot safely with the girl in the way.

My sister turns to Tommy. "Say your prayers. This is for Bernatelli," Luisa says, deciding he's the better chance since she's still got the girl. As soon as she shifts to aim her gun at Tommy, it gives me all the clearance I need to take the shot. At the very same time my gun releases, shots ring out from behind and below me, delivering a second and third blow squarely to my sister's chest.

Luisa collapses in a heap, dead, at least partly by my hand, while the girl she was holding hostage screams, slapping her blood-splattered face and clothing before getting pulled into the arms of another young woman standing next to her.

The pieces that never made sense about my cousin's death and sister's disappearance slowly start falling into place, one by one. Still, none of that makes seeing my sister lying on the ground without any hope of survival any easier to bear.

I pull the shooter to his feet by his cuffs, half-dragging him from behind the bush that was providing us cover, and begin to make the walk toward Tommy's partner just below.

"Do something with this piece of shit!" I say, pushing him towards Marco, who punches the guy square in the mouth.

"That's for Tommy, you lousy fucking traitor!" Marco yells, punching him again just as Trent joins us from behind, dragging another man across the ground.

"I'm afraid the pair of them were in on it together, Marco. I saw them come in with you and Tommy earlier, so the first shot off caught me by surprise. I came up to provide additional backup, and this one was just lining up a shot to take you out, too," Trent says.

"Fucking traitors," he says, spitting on the corpse and grabbing the other guy by the restraints I've placed him in, pushing him ahead of us as the three of us walk down the short trail and into the open.

"Thanks for the backup," I tell Trent. "He could have taken me out next, and well, you know, for doing what had to be done with my sister."

“Anytime, Layla. Taking that shot couldn’t have been easy for you. I was hoping to prevent you from having to do it at all, and I’m sure that was on Dereck’s mind, too.”

“I appreciate that more than both of you will ever know. We did what had to be done, and I know the Larussios will take care of the traitor issue,” I say as we reach the clearing of the shore.

“Of that, there is no doubt,” Trent says.

Tommy’s the first one I reach in the path of the downed bodies, and it’s strange how professional training stays with you. I lean down to examine the bullet entrance. “Don’t move too much. The bullet is still lodged. It’ll need to be removed and may hurt like hell for a while. You’ll live, but next time you corner someone with this much on the line, you need to secure the fucker first or shoot to kill. These people have nothing to lose. They will kill you in a heartbeat if you give them an opportunity or don’t kill them first,” I say, winning me a wide smile from one of the toughest Larussio men on the payroll who undoubtedly has a physician on staff for the Family who will take care of his wound.

I glance once more at my sister. She lies on the ground in a pool of blood, her dark hair like a curtain, and the tears are impossible to prevent. I give myself and her a moment, folding her hands in place together over her stomach, and say a silent prayer for her soul, thankful that she doesn’t have children or parents who will need to learn of this day. I wipe the tears from my eyes, take a deep calming breath, and stand, going to Dereck’s side as he sends the girls to wait in the van while he gets things wrapped up.

Dereck pulls me close. “I’m so sorry we couldn’t save your sister, Princess.”

“I know, papi, so am I, but she didn’t give us a choice. I’m just sorry that I didn’t figure it out before now. I thought she was a victim, kidnapped, and was going to be killed just like my cousin, Layla. She was taking all of these women, papi. Just look at them,” I say, wiping my tears from all the sadness I see around me.

“We can’t just let a cop walk away after what went down, sweetheart,” Tommy says as Marco assists him into a sitting position.

Dereck moves me behind him and has his weapon drawn in one fluid movement. “I don’t see that you have a choice. She’s not going to say a word, Tommy. One of her bullets is lying in her sister’s chest, and another kept you alive.”

Marco is watching Dereck, and Tommy's taking in the scene. "She and Trent saved my ass up on the hill, too," Marco says.

"What my sister said about me being a cop wasn't a lie, but she didn't know that I turned in my badge. I did what I could to protect the people in our community for a while until I realized it just wasn't enough. Believe this or not, I worked side by side with some of your people. The ones that didn't take too kindly to the thugs who were abusing and taking our women. I wasn't getting anywhere fast finding these networks working through the system. My cousin was killed, and then I thought traffickers kidnapped my sister, so I walked away. The traffickers and the organizations they work for just have too much information, so many eyes on the inside, and as a police officer, I kept running into red tape. It would have either ended with getting fired and charged or resigning, so I just walked away. I can assure you that I wouldn't say a word."

"I wish that were enough, sweetheart, but that's not the way this works," Tommy says.

Marco reaches for his weapon, but he's no match for Dereck, who already has his gun aimed at Tommy, who never even had a chance to draw.

"Secure him, Layla," Dereck instructs, gesturing to Marco while he walks toward Tommy, who's looking up at him from his seated position on the ground.

"This is how it's going to work from here on out. I'm not going to shoot you in the head, but Layla is going to walk out of here with me, and not you, not Marco, and none of your other friends are going to come after her once we do. I'm going to talk to my employers, who are personal friends with Mr. Larussio. They're going to tell him the entire story about Layla and her sister. You know as well as I do that Carlos Larussio doesn't condone trafficking girls, especially from men like Bernatelli, and that he'll go to great lengths to protect the people working against them. There's no reason to hurt Layla," Dereck says.

"You're asking for a lot. She and these women saw us murder people. That puts either of us in jail for the rest of our lives or ends it. You may have an in with Mr. Larussio, but the men and I have a code, a set of rules. Give us something to take back to the boss I gotta answer to that helps make this work before you go to the top," Tommy says.

"I know what might work," I say, my head wrapping around the idea that's been slowly forming.

“What’s that, Princess,” Dereck says, never taking his eyes off of Tommy or moving the gun from his head.

“I was going to disappear after I rescued my sister and take her with me until things cooled off. I was planning to use our passports, leave them behind for someone to find, for identification purposes. You know, when the time was right. Well, I can’t think of a better time than now. I’ll disappear, and no one will ever see or hear from me again. You can tell your boss whatever you want.” I gesture to my sister and take a deep breath because it is harder to say out loud than to think. “We’re the same size.” I shrug, the pieces now quickly falling in place in my mind. “My passport ends up on the ground alongside her body, and I’m officially dead. The girls and my sister go missing. We’ll change the girls’ identities, and my sister is dead. No one will be the wiser.”

“She may have a pretty good plan, Dereck. I mean, you know my boss. He’s gonna want confirmation nothing’s gonna blowback on the family. We got a body that looks like your girl, and the identification says she’s the Layla that took Bernatelli. The loose ends are nice and wrapped up, and then the way I see it, we got no problems,” Tommy says.

Dereck runs his fingers through the short dark hairs on his chin and then gestures to the van. “Bernatelli will search high and low for Luisa, and we’ll let him, but those girls aren’t going to get caught in the crossfire. They wouldn’t have been able to tell with certainty who fired what shots from where they were standing. I’ll take personal responsibility for the silence of both them and Layla. They’ll need to disappear, a long way from here and fast. Marenah, is that something you and your team can do?” he says.

“Definitely. We’ll take care of it, Dereck,” Marenah says through the earpiece.

“Layla, is that something you can live with?”

I have nothing in my old life to go back to, and Bernatelli’s men all saw me walk out that door with a gun to their boss's head. I recall the cameras in the club I worked at, and all the bars are doing the same thing. There’s no choice but to trust him. Dereck told me that he would earn it in time and keep showing up, making good on his word and promises while protecting me against even myself when all I’ve ever known is having to do it myself. And I accepted his rules, all but one, and Dereck doesn’t even know the whole of it, and yet he still wants to keep me safe and protected.

I swallow back the emotion of wanting to give over to someone dominant

and powerful for so long, having to be strong and to fight for so many reasons with no one that I could fully lean on and trust with every fiber of my being until now. “Yes.”

Dereck’s eyes blink, just once, a small tell of the emotion he tries to hide in his otherwise darkly hooded and controlled eyes. He turns them on Tommy. “Here’s the story. You and Marco took all six of Bernatelli’s goons out and rescued the girls. That will sit well with the Larussios. Layla got caught in the crossfire, and her sister took off in the boat, which exploded. Our team will set up the explosion and leave Layla’s passport next to her sister’s body with a few more personal pieces of Layla’s, which our cleanup crew will attend to tonight. The police will file it as her death, and we’ll have one of our own people manage the newspaper releases to ensure Bernatelli doesn’t suspect a thing. In the meantime, Layla and I will take the girls to Marenah, who will make sure they disappear safely.”

“I don’t have an issue with that,” Tommy says, and Marco nods.

Liam and Trent reappear, assessing the situation and letting us know the men on the boat have been dealt with and that they’re taking them to join Bernatelli.

“Roger that,” Dereck says, as Trent and Liam head out.

“My guys have Bernatelli right now, and he’s unconscious. When he wakes, it would be better for everyone concerned if he woke to your team giving him a message about trafficking in your territory, let him know the girls are gone, and let him think it was your doing. He needs to hear a strong message from you and your partners about the ills of running girls in this city with the full weight of the Larussios behind it, and I’ll take care of Layla.”

Chapter 24

Dereck

Tommy looks from me to Layla, then to Marco, and then back to me and breaks into a wide grin. “That works all away around. I would have hated to take the girl out after she saved my life, but rules are rules,” Tommy says.

“Good, and Tommy, for the record, if you ever even think about disrespecting Layla again after she saved your lives, I will personally make you regret it. Do you understand, my friend?”

He nods. “Yeah, yeah. I got it, and for the record, I am sorry,” Tommy says, looking toward Layla, who is watching the entire exchange with widened, questioning eyes, just letting it all sink in after a night that couldn’t have been easy and isn’t half over.

Layla appears contemplative like she’s thinking of something to say, but I don’t let her answer because it’s not worth her time. “Good. I’ll get our cleanup crew out here, and they’ll handle the details if you and Marco want to get someone over to where we have Bernatelli,” I say, removing Marco’s restraints.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll have someone get ahold of you with the address. In the meantime, Layla and I will take the girls and get them to safety. Oh and, Tommy. Just in case you get any other ideas, remember, my friend, the earpieces we wear double as recording devices. We find the feature comes in extremely handy from time to time.”

Tommy gestures his hand in a mock truce, wincing with movement as he and Marco head out, shuffling with the handcuffed traitor in tow.

“I’m sending a message to Marenah to find out where she wants us to bring the girls for the night,” I tell Layla, pounding out a message, and she’s

quick to reply. “Marenah has a safe house set up for the girls and will have one of our physicians meet us there, along with someone to care for them for the evening; fresh clothes, and everything they’ll need until she gets paperwork and everything they need organized.”

Layla nods, soaking it all in. She must be mentally and physically exhausted, and it will take a while after the trauma of this night before she will even start to heal, but it doesn’t show. She is good at hiding her emotions, and this is one of those times. “Come on, princess.” I take her hand, guiding her toward the van before opening it to find no middle or back seat, and the girls all huddled together on the floor.

Layla and I get in, and she immediately turns to the women, talking with them, making sure no one has any injuries that need medical attention right away, explaining the plan.

Her voice is calm and soothing, but their eyes look weary and unsure in the rearview. Layla

doesn’t let that deter her any. She continues assuring them that everything will be okay as we

make our way through the city, toward the outskirts, and to one of our safe houses tucked away

in one of the nicer neighborhoods in the area. The garage door is already up and comes down

after I’ve pulled in.

Marenah walks out the door and comes around to my side. “I’ll just be a minute,” I tell

Layla, before getting out to talk with Marenah. “Thanks for meeting us here. We don’t have the

entire story on the ladies. Just that they were getting ready to be shipped out and intended for

the overseas group. Tommy and his boys are dealing with Bernatelli now, and they’ll send him a

message about trafficking in this city, but you and I both know he’s just one man in a long list of

traffickers sending innocent women into sex slavery. I know you’re getting the division up and

running as fast as you can, but the effort needs more resources.”

“I was telling Matt that myself. We could use an army, Dereck. Sheldon needs help in New

York City. He met some girl, and he's concerned about her safety. I think Trent and Liam are

going to help, but right now, we're always pulling people to put fires out, and there's no one left

to do the research and find these people," Marenah says.

I gesture to Layla, who sits in the front seat, turned toward the women in the back, talking

with them. "She was a cop. I still need to get her vetted officially and talk with Brian, Chase,

and the entire team about her, but I think she would be a formidable asset if you're willing to hire

her, and she's agreeable after everything that happened. Layla's been relentless in finding her

sister, and we know she's dedicated and honorable. She's more than proved that tonight."

Marenah smiles and nods. "I would welcome her help, Dereck! You get it cleared with the

guys, and when she's ready, you know where to find me. In the meantime, I'll take the rest of the

ladies off your hands. I called a couple of friends who will help me get them cleaned up before

the doc arrives."

"I appreciate that, Marenah," I say before opening the van doors, letting the ladies know

the plan for the night, and allowing Marenah to take the lead with the young ladies.

Layla's quiet as I get in the van, and we head back toward the condo. "What do you think

they will do with Bernatelli?" she asks.

"He'll get a message he won't forget for a long time if I know Tommy's boys, but they'll

keep him alive. It's better for the city and for the Larussios to have Bernatelli at the helm. They

can keep him under some sort of control, as opposed to an unknown moving into the territory

and having to deal with that," I tell her.

Layla is pensive, too quiet, and I can feel her anxiety from across the

front seat of the van.

“Breathe, princess,” I tell her, inhaling and then exhaling deeply so she can follow my lead.

She is so responsive and syncs her breathing with mine in a few short moments. I give her time,

time to breathe deeply and refresh before we reach the condo. Ramon is there to greet us and takes

the van with his normal jokes about taking it for a ride, but I’m quick to get her out of the

passenger side and guide her tear-stained face into the building, up to the condo, and away from

prying eyes. I’ve barely closed the door behind us when she turns to me with fresh tears in her

eyes.

“You keep showing up, time and time again, getting me out of trouble, and all I’ve done is

lie to you, over and over. I know my being a cop puts you into a horrible situation with the family.”

I watch her closely, knowing we both have cards to lay on the table. “It’s not like everyone

on the force doesn’t have orders to observe the family activities closely. I know that you and

your security team are on the up and up, but I also know you work on the edge of the law

when you need to. You protected me with the Larussios, but Tommy was right, Dereck. Word

on the street, or at least in the department, is that Carlos Larussio is making a new way forward

for his family, but his enforcer doesn’t like it. Tommy and Frankie were lucky that Trent and I

were on that hill. If not, they would be dead, by order of the Larussio enforcer. You see,

Tommy and Marco were right to be scared not to take me out and go back and tell him that. I

owe them large for agreeing to cover up my getaway. If he ever found out, I would be dead, for

real.”

I nod. "I know, princess. Now it's my turn. Word on the street is usually what the head of the crime family wants it to be, not his enforcer, who we've had our eye on for some time. It's also why Trent and I had a plan not mentioned on the waves, and he was on that hill instead of guarding the perimeter where we left him."

"You knew?"

"Not that your sister was the snatcher for Bernatelli, but Trent, Liam, and I knew last night that if

we were short men, which we knew would happen, that Murph would call in a favor to the

Larussios. We also knew there was a pretty good chance the Larussios' current enforcer would

use it as cover to get rid of Tommy and Marco, who have been with Carlos forever. We had to

have a plan in place in case that happened, princess."

I watch the myriad of emotions play in her deep brown tired eyes. Layla inhales deeply,

and it's in that moment that I see the last pieces of her shell open as she decides to trust me with

the information that she's been hiding, even from me. "I didn't really resign. I left, walked out,

threw in the proverbial towel, and just disappeared. There was corruption, and there is in any job, but it was preventing me from finding my sister. I made sure before I got out that I had enough identity to disappear for good, but Maverick, one of the officers, saw me at the martial arts center. It spooked me, so I took off. The way things went down tonight, I won't have to worry about that coming back to haunt me either. It's finished. It's done, Dereck. It's hard to believe after all that has happened."

I nod. "I put most of that together last night with my friend Murph, who didn't quite appreciate his Q and A buddy all night."

At last, Layla smiles, a small, timid grin first, but then it grows wider as she lets all that I've said settle. "You knew a lot more than me, and it was my job to know."

I pull her close, pushing the mass of hair from her face. "No, princess, it was your desire

to know. The bad seeds scattered throughout your division made it impossible for you to know or

for you to do your job effectively, but that didn't stop you. You were relentless in your efforts to

find your sister, and you did. That's what matters, princess, that and the fact that you're still

here, right where you belong. I always knew how you felt. I could feel it. That magnetic draw is

just as strong for me as it is for you, but trust takes longer. Trust is something someone earns, and

that doesn't happen overnight. Even when I learned that not dancing topless was an issue, I knew

it was something we would overcome because, princess, you are mine, and I never had a doubt

that we would find our way in time."

She gazes up at me with deep brown bedroom eyes devoid of concern, lies, or

worry. "I love you, princess, but you know that I still have rules," I tell her, stroking her

cheek.

Layla smiles up at me as I wipe a single tear from right below her eye. "I love you, Dereck,

and every single one of your rules."

One Month Later

I wake to Dereck's warm body pulling me close, cradling me against the hardness of his chest and lower extremities. "I thought you were going to sleep all day, princess," Dereck says, nuzzling his face into my hair.

"Mmm ... I could stay wrapped up like this forever," I tell Dereck, extending the fingers of my left hand to admire the sparkling princess cut diamond that gleams against the light coming into the room through the blinds and still relishing in the day-old newness of being Dereck's wife.

"I loved your mom. Do you think she likes me?"

Dereck turns me to face him. "Princess, I could barely steal you away from her or the rest of my family! She's already given me the lecture about traveling home more often."

I smile. "Good, it was really nice to have all of your family and friends there," I say, wishing my parents could have been part of such a happy day in my life, but knowing they were with me in spirit and would be pleased that their daughter had married such a good and caring man.

Dereck uses a finger to tilt my face. "I'm sorry you couldn't invite all your old friends, Layla, and that your family wasn't there."

"It should probably bother me more than it does, I guess, but the friends I had on the force were more like acquaintances. After a day of police work, there wasn't time to get together like in all the police shows on television. After a twelve-hour shift, we were all ready to go home and get some sleep before we had to do it all over the next day. I do wish my parents could have been there and that my family situation was different, but it's not. I think all of your teammates' wives and girlfriends have taken me under their wings,

especially Marenah.”

“Have you given any more thought to her offer? You’ve already been helping with the expansion efforts. Why not make it official, or would you prefer to do something different?” Dereck asks, stroking my cheek.

I smile up at him because even though I have a romantic dinner planned for just the two of us now that all the family is gone, the time seems so right. “Well, I could, but maybe not in the dragon slaying way that you’ve come to know and love, papi.”

His lip quirks up in a smile, and his eyes light up with amusement. “Oh, yeah. Did you buy a new weapon for the occasion?”

“No, you see, I have plans to have a family with you, papi, and to give your mama a little nieto, maybe even a girl after that. I can’t keep slaying down bad guys while I’m making our family, papi.” I place his hand on my stomach. “I wouldn’t want to put the child we’re making in harm’s way.”

The silence of his voice as he absorbs what I’ve said and the glistening in his eyes is all I need to know how much this means to him. In all the long nights of conversations we’ve had curled up in this very bed, I’ve come to realize how vital family is to my husband.

Dereck pulls me tight against his chest, cradling me. “Princess, you couldn’t have made me happier. A wife and now a child.” He turns me and taps me on the nose. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug. “I wanted to bask in the fact that you wanted me for your wife before I told you about the baby. Is that so wrong?”

“No, but absolutely no chasing bad guys! And I’ve told you numerous times, I make enough for both of us, more than enough if you don’t want to work.”

I laugh at my dominant husband. “I talked to Marenah about working from home. I can pretty much work anywhere, you know, virtually, as long as we have the right equipment. And she’s excited about it too. Everyone wants to be in the field chasing bad guys, and she doesn’t have enough interested applicants in researching and finding these people. I can do that without putting our baby at risk, and...”

He tilts my face to look at his. “And what, princess? You may as well tell me all your little secrets in one fell swoop.”

I smile. “Well, I’d still like to dance, and if we have all this high tech virtual equipment, why can’t I run a dance studio online?”

His eyes widen, and he rubs his fingers through the hairs of his chin,

smiling at me. “And just what type of dancing are we talking about, Layla? Do I need to buy a pole fit for a princess too?”

I nod, unable to help the laughter that bubbles to the surface. “I’ll keep my clothes on. I promise! Pole dancing is becoming quite popular, and I’d love to teach and create some new moves. You know, ones with my own little flavor, papi.”

“Well then, I suggest you get up and get dressed. It’s time we went out and did a little shopping, and then I’ll take you out for a celebratory dinner.”

“We can, but I was going to make you a delicious home-cooked meal and tell you this evening.”

Dereck considers this for a moment. “Okay, then you’ll stay dressed in absolutely nothing but your delectable skin for much of the day. You can cook the meal you had planned, and we’ll do our shopping online. But tonight, I’m going to dress you in the finest of lingerie and gowns only to watch you dance for me and take it off piece by piece, just for me.”

“Kinda like my talents? Having a private dancer?” I sass.

“Correction. I love your talents and that you are completely mine. My submissive, wife, soon to be the mother of my child, and always, always my dancing princess.”

* * *

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* * *

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Thank You

Thank you for reading *Relentless*. Reviews help other readers connect to books they may love. Would you be willing to help your fellow readers learn what you loved about Dereck and Layla? If so, please [leave a review](#).

Acknowledgments

Wayne, my husband, thank you for always believing in me, supporting my passions, and helping me make my impossible dream come true.

My parents and family have been a steady reminder that you can achieve your goals with determination, hard work, and commitment. Thank you!

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A special thank you to all the people who diligently bring all the aspects of these novels together. It takes an army, and I may be a bit biased, but this team is fantastic!

Debbie, my amazing street team, and all the groups, bloggers, and book lovers who spread the word about these stories, thank you!

Via's House of Vixens, is a "private" Facebook group for readers and fans to connect. If you would like to be part of this group, [request to join](#) for loads of fun!

I hope you continue reading [Elusive](#) to find out what happens next!

About Via Mari

Contemporary romantic suspense author Via Mari likes to keep her readers on the edge, fanning themselves as the action unfolds and the heat rises. Her books, featuring the most handsome, intense males, exemplify extreme romance, with powerful men who will stop at nothing to protect the women they love.

Via was raised in both the United States and United Kingdom. Since childhood, she has enjoyed reading books that carry you away. In fact, you can still find her in the early hours of the morning, curled up in an overstuffed chair by a crackling wood fire, reading a page-turning novel, especially during the harsh winters of the Midwestern United States.

When not writing, Via spends her days with her husband. She enjoys gardening, shopping at the local farmers market, and walking in town or around a big city. And she loves traveling to research her next novel.

She also loves interacting with her readers, so feel free to connect with her on the following social media sites! If you want to stay updated on the latest releases and claim a copy of an exclusive story, [sign up for her newsletter](#).

Note From The Author

In our country and worldwide, the business of human trafficking continues to grow in astronomical proportions. While anyone can be a victim, the majority are women and girls.

Most of us think about trafficking as an act of kidnapping and perhaps envision the victim being brutally forced to do something against their will, and while that happens frequently, coercion is often used as a powerful weapon to ensure someone does exactly as they are instructed.

As I wrote this novel, my thoughts wandered to those who, under extreme duress, are pressured to do things against their will. I thought of the many scared and brave victims who are going through these types of trauma, and the scary fact is that these cruelties could be happening right under our very noses, with us completely unaware. They could be our daughters, nieces, granddaughters, neighbors or friends, people who look and act completely normal each day but, unknown to us, are being threatened with something so great, they believe following explicit directions from the people who threaten them is the only choice they have. In some small way, I hope this novel assists in our world's human trafficking awareness efforts.

I hope that you enjoy the romance, the hunky bodyguards, the suspense that always follows them, and the happily-ever-after in this novel.

—Love, Via